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Are Executive Positions Being Refused?

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Are Executive Positions Being Refused?

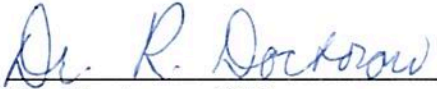
by
Jared R. Koyle

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Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

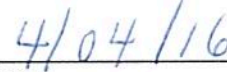
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Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Jared R. Koyle under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.



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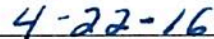
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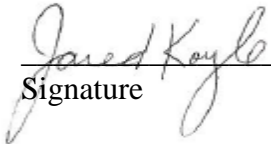
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Abstract

Are Executive Positions Being Refused? Jared R. Koyle, 2016: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. ERIC Descriptors: Developmental Programs, Government Employees, Leadership, Organizational Development, Promotion (Occupational)

Ascending into the executive level of an organization can be considered a crowning achievement in one's profession. It is usually a position in which those most qualified could ultimately arrive. Yet, some organizations, particularly within the U.S. federal government, claim that coveted executive positions are remaining vacant or are not being filled as readily as has traditionally occurred. Even with programs available for a person to become more qualified for advancement, the positions remain unfilled. The level at which employees traditionally qualify for executive positions is the level at which fewer seem to be applying for those positions. In other words, it appears that potential executive candidates are refusing to advance into executive vacancies, which is often referred to as the progression paradox. An organization unable to promote employee advancement into executive vacancies could potentially inhibit its own progression.

The ideas of position qualification and position refusal are two concepts that have not been studied collectively nor received the level of scrutiny that is perhaps needed to answer the fundamental question: Why are gaps in executive-level positions not being filled as expected? Therefore, the researcher utilized grounded-theory analysis to develop a theory into whether adequately defined capabilities freely and clearly enable employee advancement into executive leadership levels. This study delved into the literature and reviewed several inquiries made into the personal perspectives of employees at various levels throughout a Department of Defense agency regarding constructs that could affect ascension into executive leadership ranks. The researcher then built on the findings from these inquiries to create a model of alignment with an organization's core purpose. Essentially, this research offers an increased understanding into the mask of ambiguity that inhibits progression and identifies the elements needed to assist qualified employees who are refusing to advance into executive vacancies.

Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Definition of Terms.....	6
Purpose of the Study	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Historical Context	11
Changing Demographics Lead to Changing Perspectives on Leadership	12
Impact of an Aging Workforce	15
Barriers to Advancement	17
Retention Strategies	22
Theoretical Framework	24
Advancing Advancement.....	32
Identifying and Developing Capable Leaders.....	34
Developing Leaders for the Department of Defense	38
Public versus Private Leadership Development	40
Summary	44
Research Questions	45
Chapter 3: Methodology	46
Aim of the Study.....	46
Initial Research	48
The Research Setting	68
Participants and Sampling.....	68
Procedures	69
Trustworthiness.....	75
Limitations	76
Chapter 4: Results	77
Accessing Senior-Level Positions: Setting Stage for Determining Constructs	77
Initial Analysis	79
Qualification Considered for Leadership.....	89
Perspectives on Retention	106
Pathway for Progression	108
Making Information Available	120
Subsequent Throughput from Higher Levels.....	141
Alignment with Policy	144
Summary	149
Chapter 5: Discussion	152
Introduction.....	152
Overview of the Study	152
Summary of the Findings.....	155

Causal Mechanism	156
Conceptual Model	166
Recommendations for Agency X.....	169
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study	170
References	173
Appendices	
A Pilot Survey.....	194
A Interview Protocol.....	197
C Trends in Age, Years of Service, Retirement Age, and Number of Retirements	200
D Frequency of Word Usage	202
E Conceptual Model.....	204
F Performance Trajectory for Agency X	206
Tables	
1 Number of Selectees for Centralized Development Program.....	66
2 First-Tier Themes.....	81
3 Job Satisfaction With Regard to Family and Home.....	85
4 Gender With Regard to Family and Home	86
5 College Degree With Regard to Family and Home	86
6 Gender and Job Satisfaction.....	86
7 College Degree and Job Satisfaction	87
8 Gender and Positive or Negative Words.....	87
9 College Degree and Positive or Negative Words	88
10 General-Schedule Level and Positive or Negative Words.....	88

Chapter 1: Introduction

Attaining an executive-level position, whether in the private sector or the public sector, may very well be the culminating status of a person's career. It is often considered the level at which the cadre of an organization's best and brightest tend to congregate. In the private sector, this executive level is frequently referred to as the C-suite (Smith & Campbell, 2010). It is the suite in which the chief executive officer, chief operating officer, chief financial officer, and chief information officer reside. In the public sector, for example, the Department of Defense (DoD), common civilian executive titles may be executive director or deputy executive director. However, titles such as chief operating officer or chief information officer (Defense Contract Management Agency [DCMA], 2014c) may also apply. Regardless of the title, those in the civilian executive ranks become part of an elite group (Carey, 2012) of federal employees referred to as senior executive service (SES).

The federal government is cognizant of current negative shifts in employee advancement into federal executive positions. In particular, there are certain government sectors that have become attentive to employees' lack of progression into higher levels of management and leadership responsibilities at the rate needed to fill looming employment gaps. The issue is not just at the middle and senior manager levels; it seems to reach all the way to the executive level. Traditionally, the executive level has often been what lower level employees have aspired to (Johnson, 2010; Ramakrishnan, 2008). Yet, reality may indicate otherwise, as explained in the following chapters.

In 2009, the Senior Executive Association conducted a survey of employees from 17 departments, agencies, or other federal organizations to determine how attractive executive-level positions are to those at the General Schedule (GS) levels 14 and 15.

These GS levels are just below the SES level (Carey, 2012; Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2014a). The survey results underscored that executive-level positions may not be pursued in the manner and with the enthusiasm originally expected.

Statement of the Problem

The problem for this grounded-theory thesis was that the federal government suffers from a lack of employee progression into executive-level positions at the agency level. The federal government as a whole is facing an unprecedented wave of potential retirements of baby boomers from the workforce (Jeffries, 2011). As they leave, vacancies become available. However, economic constraints continue to underwrite the difficulty of hiring employees (Katz, 2014) to fill the impending vacancies. Additionally, it appears the next generation of federal workers adheres to a different set of priorities than previous generations when pursuing developmental opportunities, which can create ascendancy misunderstandings (Benko & Weisberg, 2008; Devlin, 2014; Ronayne, 2007). The cause for concern increases as trends indicate that gaps in leadership are not being filled as frequently as they have in the past (Katz, 2014). Therefore, employment gaps continue to appear at the senior and executive leadership levels.

Literature and theoretical perspectives presented in the following chapters describe the problem in greater detail and attempt to look into potential reasons for the problem. This problem is somewhat of a paradox because it appears that the level at which employees qualify for executive positions is the level at which fewer employees are applying for those positions; it is a level at which it appears employees are refusing to advance into executive vacancies. Additionally, it seems that, as the need for executive leaders is increasing, the resources to fill that need are decreasing. For purposes of this dissertation, this dilemma is referred to as the progression paradox.

Phenomenon of interest. The literature in Chapter 2 presents potential reasons why the progression paradox could be occurring. Some of these reasons may be the result of the generational transition in the workforce, the leadership-development framework currently in existence or not in existence within government departments, or simply that employees (i.e., potential executives) are not making it a priority to become an executive. Another reason may be the result of policies, regulations, and budgets constructed at higher levels of the federal government that are initially implemented at the executive levels of individual agencies but cause unfavorable results when trickled down to the lower levels. Each of these reasons could potentially influence the dilemma.

It is possible that a deeper inspection into these reasons through a grounded-theory systematic design could reveal additional, yet unknown sources of the problem. Many organizations have a business model or strategic plan they follow that is ardently utilized to navigate the complex channels of industry. Often, the model is composed of prioritization decisions (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). For some federal agencies, the priorities are defined within strategic management and human-capital plans. These plans tell what the organization will do yet perhaps lack the clarifying details to direct how and why they will do what they plan to do (DCMA, 2009, 2013a).

Whether the answer is one, all, or none of these reasons, it was fitting to use the grounded-theory method, as explained in Chapter 3, to investigate further whether some portion of the federal government had adequately defined capabilities that freely and clearly enable employee advancement into executive leadership levels. Here, capabilities refers to the resources, processes, and priorities of an organization as well as its culture (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). A better understanding of an agency's capabilities should provide greater insight into the causal relationship between the agency's

capabilities and the concepts of position qualification and position refusal.

Background and justification. Inordinate numbers of federal workers at the agency level are not progressing along the path to becoming senior executive leaders. Indications surrounding the phenomenon of interest became more apparent through a contextual examination of the interconnectedness between the overall federal government and a single government agency, particularly one within the DoD. For example, a sizeable percentage of the federal civilian workforce employed with the DoD is expected to move forward with the retirement process (Jeffries, 2011). The wave of baby-boomer retirements has the potential of generating advancement and hiring opportunities at the senior and executive levels, and of altering succession-planning practices (Jeffries, 2011). Attrition of employees produces gaps in work responsibilities (Locke, 2010a; Mosher, 2014), which is a main concern of leaders in the DoD (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014; Crawford, 2005; Farrell & Hutton, 2011; Moore, 2014).

Since 2009, the rate at which employees have left the SES has increased 36% (Katz, 2014), which is about even with the rest of the workforce. Signs point to retirements being a key indicator for the SES departures (Carey, 2012; Katz, 2014; Ronayne, 2007). The retirement of the baby-boomer generation from the workforce presents the following issues. The first is that many of these boomers are in the senior and executive levels, and their leaving opens up job vacancies. An observer might think that the impatient (Ronayne, 2007) Generation X employees would be clamoring to fill the gaps, but it is not happening at the rate anticipated (Carey, 2012; Locke, 2010a; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). The second is that, because of economic stagnation, some senior executive staff members have chosen to delay retirement (Ronayne, 2007; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014), causing the next

generation to find advancement opportunities more difficult to identify and maneuver their way into (Ronayne, 2007). Their careers are essentially grounded in place until a potential vacancy becomes available.

When the economy is down and funding is low (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014; Middlehurst, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014), training initiatives are often the first thing to be cut. A lack in funding for training is only exacerbated by the growing costs needed to sustain the rising retirement rate (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). Reports signal what appears to be a lack of personal employee desire to progress into federal jobs (Neal, 2014; Thompson, 2000) and, hence, federal executive-level employment (Katz, 2014). Evidence highlighting the issue became more apparent in the 2009 study by the Senior Executives Association that investigated federal government deficiencies in attracting the next generation of federal leaders. Perhaps employees have not made it a priority, or the current leadership is uninspiring to potential leaders, making it difficult to retain the much-needed future leaders (Colarusso, Lyle, & Wardynski, 2010).

Much of the issue seems to come back to generational differences. Observers have found that the generation currently vying for senior-level leadership positions is following spiraling career patterns, in which potential leaders are pursuing professional interests across multiple sectors and never staying in one location for very long (Ronayne, 2007). Should this pattern continue, it could make training and retention even more difficult than it is presently (Carey, 2012; Colarusso et al., 2010; Koonce, 2010; Smith & Campbell, 2010). Therefore, additional insight into an individual agency's background could uncover a compelling phenomenon that points to a relationship between the agency's capabilities, employees being qualified for advanced positions, and

employees refusing those positions.

Deficiencies in the evidence. There is currently no way of validating the cause with regard to the lack of advancement toward senior leadership positions at the agency level. Of the 17 departments, agencies, or other federal organizations surveyed in the study by the Senior Executives Association, not one DoD agency was involved. The DoD is the largest employer of federal employees in the U.S. government (Office of Management and Budget, 2012). The issues facing one agency within the DoD are likely similar to those being faced by others. Additionally, the Senior Executives Association surveyed only GS-14 and GS-15 employees. There was little or no input from the SES level or GS-13 and lower levels. Further insight at these levels can broaden the spectrum of knowledge into the dilemma. Moreover, there is a paucity of literature that intently investigates why employees refuse advancement into executive-level vacancies within the federal government.

Audience. Potential parties benefiting from the research are entry-level employees, mid-level managers, senior leaders, and executive leaders. The results of the research help to identify areas of improvement in leadership-development training. The outcomes provide guidance for potential leaders, trainers, coaches, and mentors within a federal agency.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this applied dissertation, the following terms are defined.

Baby boomer. This term refers to the post-World War II generation born between 1946 and 1964, sometimes also referred to as the Woodstockers (Dychtwald, Erickson, & Morison, 2006; Martin & Tulgan, 2006).

Culture. This term refers to a collective social entity within an organization that

shares common values, practices, behaviors, and perceptions that are critical to handling issues at both the core and periphery of the organization (Marquardt, 2011; Schein, 1988).

Entry-level employee. This term refers to an employee at the lower levels of a hierarchy. These employees display leadership ability and receive initial responsibility as new leaders (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). The operational definition of entry-level employees is a potential leader at the GS-1 through GS-10 levels. Some of these potential leaders desire to be recognized and mentored and then progress into greater leadership responsibilities (Crawford, 2005; Johnson & Lederer, 2005).

Generation X and Y. This term refers to a homogeneous group of many different subgroups of individuals, with differing backgrounds, outlooks, and beliefs, born between 1965 and 1994 (Guthrie, 2009; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009).

Leadership advancement. The conceptual definition defines leadership advancement as those aspiring to enter or advance within the senior and executive leadership ranks. Examples of senior and executive-level leadership include directors, chairs, vice presidents, presidents, and chief executives. The operational definition is the growth or progression from entry-level positions (i.e., GS-1 through GS-10), mid-level manager positions (i.e., GS-11 through GS-13 that includes supervisors, managers, team leaders, and group leaders), and senior-level leadership positions (i.e., GS-14 and GS-15 that includes contract-management office (CMO) directors and deputy directors) into the senior executive leadership positions (i.e., GS-16 through GS-18 that includes agency leads and directors).

Leadership development. The conceptual definition is from the Army's leadership-development program handbook (Army ROTC, 2009), which defines

leadership development as the continuous process of training, assessment, and feedback with the goal of instilling and enhancing desirable behavior in organizational managers. It is also the “crystallization and consolidation of new insights, knowledge, observable skills and responsibilities” (Basik et al., 2011, p. 12). The operational definition is a form of training and measurement through a series of milestones or benchmarks.

Mid-level employee. The operational definition for mid-level employees is GS-9 through GS-13.

Millennials. This term refers to individuals born between 1980 and 2000 who are currently entering the workforce (Price-Waterhouse-Coopers, 2011; Seppanen & Gualtieri, 2012). According to Price-Waterhouse-Coopers (2011), “their career aspirations, attitudes about work, and knowledge of new technologies are defining the culture of the 21st century workplace” (p. 3).

Priorities. This term refers to the condition of being more important than something or someone else and therefore coming or being dealt with first. Priorities are shaped by the structural context of the organization’s business model; they denote constraints that delineate areas where an organization is incapable of performing at desirable margins of success (Bower, 1986; Christensen & Kaufman, 2008).

Private sector. This term refers to the majority of the employed population in the economy (Argote, 2005; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2011).

Processes. This term refers to a method for converting resources into products and services. Processes are the method behind how products are researched, budgeted, developed, and marketed. Those that are in line with the requisite tasks are more likely to be considered focused organizations. They become part of the organization’s culture, they become habitual, and they can be a capability or a disability, depending on the

situation, culture, or habit (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008).

Public sector. This term refers to the general government and civil service (Brinkley, 2012).

Qualification. This term refers to competencies regarded as necessary to be considered for vacant leadership positions in the federal executive civil services (OPM, 2012).

Refusal. This term refers to the act of rejecting the opportunity to apply for, or be accepted into, a vacant leadership position within the federal services (Chief Human Capital Officers Council, 2012).

Resources. This term refers to people, equipment, technology, product designs, brands, information, cash, relationship with suppliers, distributors, and customers; they are qualified, interested people (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008).

Senior executive service (SES). The conceptual definition is a corps of executives selected for their leadership qualifications, composed of men and women, charged with leading the continuing transformation of government, who possess well-honed executive skills and share a broad perspective of government and a public service commitment, which is grounded in the U.S. Constitution (OPM, 2012). The operational definition involves agency leads and directors at the GS-16, GS-17, and GS-18 levels (James, 2012) who do not require an appointment by the President by and with the advice of the Senate.

Senior-level employee. This term refers to “employees who are regarded as program directors and fall under the SES or GS-15 equivalent pay grade levels” (Finnie, 2014, p. 2) Senior leadership positions include GS-14 and GS-15 directors and deputy directors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze potential reasons for gaps in executive-leadership advancement within a DoD agency. The study was designed to examine the phenomenon of interest regarding employees' refusal to advance into executive-level vacancies within the federal government and to combine the concepts of position qualification and position refusal into a reliable theory. In an effort to simplify the complexities of the progression paradox, this study presented entry-level, mid-level, senior-level, and executive-level employees' perceptions regarding opportunities for advancement into executive-level positions within a federal agency. The unique perspectives of employee qualification and advancement permit the simple question: Are executive positions being refused? Therefore, the study attempts to delve into the theory of why executive positions might in fact be refused.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

To ensure the sustainability of highly qualified employees at senior and executive levels, what should current executives do? This literature review examines the background of the problem within the U.S. federal government, the characteristics of successful leadership development, the meaning of position qualification, refusal, how the organization's capabilities are a determining factor in future success, and barriers that may impede that success.

Historical Context

A government agency's director, as well as other members of the senior leadership team, is part of an elite group of individuals belonging to the federal government's SES. They are "the senior people at the top of the pyramid or at the nexus of the organizational network" (Burke, 2002, p. 244). They hold positions at the supergrade level (Carey, 2012), which consists of the three remaining levels above GS-15 (OPM, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e), formerly known as GS-16, GS-17, and GS-18 (James, 2012). They serve in the key positions just below the top Presidential appointees and act as a link between these appointees and the remainder of the federal workforce. These are individuals who received the necessary credentials to qualify (OPM, 2012) for and pursue such an elevated position (Carey, 2012). They are the C-suite of the federal civil service agencies.

Prior to the SES, a group of senior federal leaders was nonexistent (Carey, 2012). However, as a result of Title IV of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, the SES was officially established on July 13, 1979. Its sole purpose was to ensure that the executive management of the government of the United States is responsive to the needs, policies,

and goals of the nation and otherwise is of the highest quality. Officials felt that the establishment of a civilian cadre of senior leaders with desirable managerial skills could help control disparities, be a benefit to the leadership gap that was extant (Carey, 2012), and provide agencies with considerable authority and flexibility (OPM, 2014b). The greater objective was to tie together the bureaucratic disconnect that seemed to cause fragmentation between the higher levels of government departments, agencies, and Congress during the transition from one U.S. President's administration to another (Carey, 2012).

Changing Demographics Lead to Changing Perspectives on Leadership

As baby boomers age and retire, the next generations, commonly referred to as Generation X and the Millennials, are next in line to fill the gaps (Crawford, 2005; Locke, 2010a). A 2011 federal report indicated the U.S. federal civilian workforce consisted of nearly 1.7 million full-time employees with over 25% employed with the DoD (Jeffries, 2011). That number grew to 1.8 million full-time employees in a 2014 report with an overall federal workforce of 2.1 million (Partnership for Public Service, 2014). Between 2007 and 2016, the OPM anticipated an increase from 22.9% to 60.8% in retirement eligibility for the overall federal workforce (Jeffries, 2011).

The current demographic of personnel entering the executive levels of employment with the federal government were born approximately between 1964 and 1979. They are known as Generation X (Ronayne, 2007). There are nearly three times as many SES members, over 60 years of age (i.e., baby boomer), than the next generation (i.e., Generation X and Millennial) of SES members (Ronayne, 2007). The Partnership for Public Service (2011) reported, "From 2006 to 2009, more than 100,000 people under 30 started a federal career. Currently, nearly 10% of the federal workforce is 20-

something years old” (p. 3). Ronayne (2007) stated, “In today’s federal sector, this small cohort is underrepresented, only about 25% of the federal workforce, vs. upwards of 40% by some accounts in the private sector, in large part due to hiring freezes/downsizing in the 90s” (p. 1).

Overall, whether public or private, the generations following the baby boomers tend not to have as favorable a view of federal employment as previous generations (Thompson, 2000) nor consider the government to be a source for problem resolution (Ronayne, 2007). This perspective may be a contributing factor toward the lack of ascendancy into executive positions at the agency level. However, the perspectives of the younger generations are different from that of the silver-hairs (Devlin, 2014), and these generational differences present new problems to be resolved (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001; Paulin & Riordan, 1998).

As Ronayne (2007) shared, there are some younger generational viewpoints that may be difficult for baby boomers to process:

“Impatience” is a word often used to describe Generation X, particularly in terms of their desire to move up and ahead in organizations. What once could have been explained as a life stage issue (young people tend to be more impatient regardless of generation) seems to have more legs than that. In fact, some of the “impatience” perceptions are likely fueled by a heavy dose of pragmatism and a focus on competence in this cohort. Namely: “If I have the education, have a measure of experience, and have demonstrated an ability to get the job done, I should be able to compete for a position at the next level of responsibility.” This “impatience” can be heightened by perceptions of slowness, stagnation, and process over content in Federal hiring and promotion. (p. 4)

Not only is the next generation a little wary of how to interact with the gray-beard generation (Mullan, 2008; Waite, 2008), but the older generation is just as cautious of the younger generation’s (Brack, 2012; McNaught, 2012) alternate perspectives (Devlin, 2014) of how an organization should be led. Current leaders are struggling to adapt to the

necessary changes in generational career outlooks, mainly due to the different circumstances current leadership was brought up in (Benko & Weisberg, 2008).

As millennials acquire more responsibility from the baby-boomer generation, they are likely to attempt new alternatives to meet mission requirements (Devlin, 2014). Additionally, millennials are not afraid of exploring other job opportunities if the current job is unable to offer the desired opportunities, and more employees are considering their employment to be only part of the balance needed in life (Ronayne, 2007). Therefore, working extra hours or doing what has historically been accepted to be a good soldier (Bateman & Organ, 1983) in the workplace is not as applicable to millennials. Their perspectives are such that status and income is not everything (Brack, 2012; Schawbel, 2012), nor does position necessarily mean one has arrived (London Business School, 2009; NAS Recruitment Communications, 2014; Ross, 2010).

The younger generation of workers is much more mobile (Lasica, 2007) and more likely to prefer teleworking (Tuutti, 2012) from a virtual desk (Bansal & Knox-Hayes, 2013). Traditionally, older generations, such as those currently at the helm of government agencies, prefer seeing and having access to coworkers physically in the office (Bateman & Organ, 1983). Therefore, it might be difficult to score points with the boss and effectively make substantive career advancements (Mullan, 2008) if the younger employees are only virtually accessible (London Business School, 2009). Yet, to younger employees, their views of professional advancement do not necessarily include impressing the boss (Giang, 2012) in a traditional command-and-control type of setting (Petrie, 2011).

Instead, their views of leadership include working in and reaching out into a network of coworkers (Avolio, 2007) who are considered equal team members, as each

works together to solve particular issues or reach specific goals (Brack, 2012; NAS Recruitment Communications, 2014). Success to them is determined by how much faster, smarter, and flexible (Marquardt, 2011) they can be and not necessarily by a person's title (Petrie, 2011). Their views of advancing do not necessarily include a ladder but instead a lattice (Benko & Weisberg, 2008), which brings back the network mentality (Petrie, 2011).

Leaders are more like nodes in the network, and the more connections into and out of that node, the more senior of a leader that person becomes (Burke, 2002). Some scholars suggest that lowering the elevation of the organizational structure (George, 2011; Petrie, 2011) to a degree may be more appealing to younger employees to advance into executive levels (Schawbel, 2012). This "streamlined, unbounded, flat structure maximizes contact, information flow, local responsibility, the flow of knowledge and learning, and collaboration within and outside the organization" (Marquardt, 2011, p. 25). Leaders may then be able to more easily look out across the landscape of networked employees (Avolio, 2007; Benko & Weisberg, 2008) instead of up a seemingly daunting mountain (Schawbel, 2012) of a vertically aligned organizational structure.

Impact of an Aging Workforce

As the baby boomers age and retirements become more prevalent, industry, particularly the federal government (Farrell & Hutton, 2011), is presented with a leadership-gap dilemma (Brack, 2012). Those eligible for retirement can be found at all levels within the government (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014). Throughout the course of their careers, many potential retirees have worked their way to the top positions of federal agencies (Carey, 2012). Although some are choosing to remain in their employed positions a little longer than the historical average (Post, Schneer, Reitman, & Ogilvie,

2013), they will eventually retire, sooner rather than later (Moore, 2013). When they do, their absence opens up vacancies, gaps in knowledge, skills, and abilities, and especially gaps within the organizational structure (Brack, 2012; DCMA, 2009; Locke, 2010b; Russell, 2011).

The U.S Government Accountability Office submitted a report in February 2011 asserting that there is a strong need in the DoD to “address current and emerging critical skill gaps that are undermining agencies’ abilities to meet their vital missions” (Farrell & Hutton, 2011, p. 1). Of concern to the DoD is the number of senior-leader civilian workforce members who are expected to retire or leave through various forms of attrition in the next few years (Farrell & Hutton, 2011; OPM, 2012). The average age of leadership within most governmental organizations strongly suggests that considerable changes in personnel can be expected (Jeffries, 2011).

This silver tsunami, or wave of baby boomers heading toward retirement (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014; Levitz, 2008), was regularly discussed at the end of the last decade (DCMA, 2009; Hole, Zhong, & Schwartz, 2009; McPhie, Rose, & Sapin, 2008) and during the period of the recent great recession (Burtless & Bosworth, 2013; Johnson, 2012). In 2011, the OPM anticipated an increase from 22.9% to 60.8% in retirement eligibility for the overall federal workforce (Jeffries, 2011). From 2000 to 2012, the number of federal workers who were 60 years or older grew from 94,000 to 262,000, respectively (Moore, 2013). Additionally, there were almost 70,000 federal employees with 35 years or more of government service near the end of 2012 (Moore, 2013).

Across all of industry, NAS Recruitment Communications (2014) estimated that over 11 million baby boomers were eligible to leave the workforce in 2014. Moore

(2014) also emphasized that 30% of federal employees would be eligible to retire by 2016, which is about 58% of senior executive leaders (Moore, 2014). Between 2012 and 2017, 59,000 federal employees would be eligible to retire each year, which is approximately 300,000 over the course of 5 years. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014) doubled that number to nearly 600,000, approximately 31%, by 2017. Although the concerns are real, they might be overly anxious (106th Congress, 2000; Carlson, 2005, DCMA, 2009), because it seems that some of the fears of a large retirement wave have waned slightly (Moore, 2013), as more baby boomers delay retirement (Levitz, 2008; Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2012; Post et al., 2013).

Barriers to Advancement

Understanding how to gain access to the training, tools and resources required for federal executive positions can be somewhat unclear (American Society for Training and Development, 2014; McKinsey, 2013). Some employees are able to figure out a pathway to getting as high as the senior leadership levels, only to hit a figurative brick wall (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006) when attempting to progress any further. Without the knowledge of what these barriers are (Partnership for Public Service, 2002) and where they are located, opportunities to remain competitive, develop a wide array of diverse skills for adaptability to various scenarios (Smith, De León, Marshall, & Cantrell, 2012), and eventually become a future executive can become very limited (Schroeder, 2011; Stier, 2009).

As will be discussed, some of the major barriers to advancement may include qualified personnel who may have become too cavalier in their initiative for progression. Another barrier could be that the current executives are not doing enough to develop, implement, and market an effective development program for their organization. Also

some senior and executive leaders may be delaying retirement, which would make advancement more difficult for eligible, lower level employees. A final barrier could be that the pay is not attractive enough for the required level of responsibility or workload.

Casual priorities. The traditional notion tends to be that glory, honor, and power reside with those in the executive echelons of society (Burns, 2010; Hambrick, 2007; Mills, 2000), which may cause some to wonder why others would not want to bask in its projected magnificence (Goffee & Jones, 2007; Herzberg, 1986; Tingley, 2008). Neal (2014) suggested that mid-career experts who tend to be more settled in their professions may be unable or unwilling to make a change in their upward progression. Is it possible that some high-caliber employees are becoming too casual and incurious toward obtaining the executive suite? Is it even a priority? After all, it appears some employees (i.e., potential executives) are refusing culminating positions even though they are qualified to fill the vacancy, which goes against conventional wisdom. Perhaps employees (i.e., potential executives) are refusing to pursue a culminating position because they cannot get access to the executive training that would cultivate the necessary mindset and capabilities needed to qualify for that position (Koonce, 2010).

The C-suite: Careless, care less, or careerless. For those in the C-suite, it would seem crucial to have a cadre of strong employees available and ready to fill the employment gaps (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014), whether those gaps were left by retiring baby boomers (Jeffries, 2011) or for some other reason. In fact, although 78% of federal agency human-capital managers stated that identifying or closing skills gaps in their workforce is their primary priority, only 45% are currently working on applicable initiatives (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014). Three fourths of global employers researched stated that their primary concern is the inability to fill skills gaps. Yet, only 6% stated

they are doing anything to try to close the gaps. Three years later, the problem remains.

Smith and Campbell (2010) confirmed that organizations continue to struggle to make sure there are enough qualified, talented, and motivated employees to sustain organizational prosperity. This is perhaps because top executives currently filling the C-suite roles have become comfortable and careless, not doing enough to attend to the negative workforce trends regarding skills gaps and training (Accenture, 2013; Cornerstone on Demand, 2014; Moore, 2014), resulting in a less appealing work environment (Price-Waterhouse-Coopers, 2011). In a 2012 study of SES by OPM, it was determined that most of those in SES positions are comfortable with the development opportunities and advice they are receiving (OPM, 2012).

Prospective candidates for SES positions do not receive the information and support needed from agency leaders regarding potential opportunities and how to prepare for them. Essentially, the executives appear not to care (Leer, 2007; O'Driscoll, Sugrue, & Vona, 2010). It may not be a priority to them to adequately consider the agency's needs to have a strong leader-centric workforce (Goffee & Jones, 2006; Green, 2008). In contrast, Smith and Campbell (2010) found that organizations with successful development-management practices are those in which senior executives made it a priority to be involved in the development process.

Perhaps executives' views are more a reflection of regarding the newer generation of employees (Criswell & Martin, 2007) as being careerless (Levit & Licina, 2011). With educated millennials continuing to shuffle around from job to job (Price-Waterhouse-Coopers, 2011), appearing to not have a focused career path (Benko & Weisberg, 2008; Levit & Licina, 2011), current executives may not feel compelled to reveal or entrust them with (Kochan, 2004) the executive pathway. However, making it a priority to

remove the barriers along that pathway, despite how fickle the next generation might be (Benko & Weisberg, 2008), could be the key to avoiding promotion refusals (Shellenbarger, 2013), retaining talent, and ensuring sustainable success (Colarusso et al., 2010).

Delayed retirement. Why are they delaying retirement? Sometimes retirement-eligible employees avoid retiring because they actually enjoy the work they do (Moore, 2013). Just because the baby boomers are eligible to retire does not mean they are in a life position to do so (Ronayne, 2007). This is partly due to the great recession, which helped to hold off the prefigured wave (Brack, 2012; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). As many as 80% of would-be retirees are reconsidering the option of retiring during the traditional retirement years (NAS Recruitment Communications, 2014) by opting to work part-time instead (Dychtwald, 2005), possibly for financial reasons (Locke, 2010b). Some stay in order to increase their pension more than what it otherwise would have been had they retired earlier (Moore, 2013). In fact, those at the tail end of the baby boomers are more likely at the pinnacle of their careers, wanting options for the future, and do not feel ready to entirely stop working (Benko & Weisberg, 2008).

What effect can delayed retirement have on an organization? For one, it can become more difficult for younger employees to advance when baby boomers take longer to retire (Guthrie, 2009; Ronayne, 2007). Ronayne (2007) stated the following:

This [issue]...is termed the “gray ceiling” – [where] promising [employees] in their 30s and early 40s find themselves stuck, unable to move up because the pathways to advancement are blocked by Baby Boomers postponing retirement. Much has been made of the impending “retirement tsunami,” particularly in the senior leadership ranks in the Federal sector, where some 70% are eligible or soon eligible to retire. However, “eligibility” to retire does not mean “able” to retire.” (p. 4)

Additionally, there is a growing number of less experienced employees from the next-

generation cohort who are eligible to compete for senior positions, which has historically caused very tight competition (Ronayne, 2007).

During difficult periods of national unemployment, many important positions go unfilled (Smith et al., 2012), making it more difficult for organizations to expand and compete (West, 2013). However, potential retirees cannot hold off retiring forever (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). A study of three large federal departments indicated that, from 2004 to 2007, retirement rates remained flat and then fell during the great recession (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). Yet, retirement rates returned to prerecession levels in 2011 and have slowly risen since (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). Therefore, with retirement rates gently increasing, tighter budgets are compounding the effects on successful organizational hiring initiatives making it more difficult to fill the employment gaps (Farrell & Hutton, 2011). Additionally, when fiscal issues increase, so can work-related stress, causing even the reliable employees to look for greener pastures (Moore, 2013). Employees depart with the hope that other employment will be less stressful and offer greater opportunities for training and advancement (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Mackay & Ross, 2014).

Pay scale. Even if a successful form of restructuring occurs, the current pay scale could still present a problem. Pay was not an attractive draw to SES positions. In fact, with present pay scales, an employee in a GS-15 position could very possibly make more money than an SES and yet have less responsibility (OPM, 2012; Partnership for Public Service, 2009). Additional research validates that people in the GS-15 category feel a pay increase that would come from an increase in title (i.e., SES) would be unequal to the amount of increase in work required for the position (Katz, 2014; Stier, 2011). It is difficult for government pay to compete with that of industry (Neal, 2014). It is common

knowledge that private-sector workers make more money than those in the public sector (Stier, 2011). Therefore, if federal agencies want to retain talent, they must understand that increases in the demand for talent and professional positions will also mean an increase in the demand for higher pay and benefits (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014), which does not usually work in favor of government-hiring initiatives (Neal, 2014). Regardless of the challenges, the retention and management of appropriate future talent remains a priority (Colarusso et al., 2010).

Retention Strategies

During a time of unprecedented numbers of seasoned employees' ability to retire, even with hiring freezes and significant budget cuts, the obligation to allure and train fresh new leaders is extremely important (Partnership for Public Service, 2011).

Cornerstone on Demand (2014) reported the following:

The potential loss of leadership and institutional knowledge due to massive turnover underscores the importance of a strategic and efficient approach to developing and retaining individuals with the critical skills needed to lead federal government agencies in the coming years. (p. 5)

Therefore, with the current workforce aging and debating whether to retire, more opportunities to progress into higher leadership positions could become available for entry-level and mid-level members of the workforce (Crawford, 2005). How does an agency hold onto the younger employees long enough to help them progress into those higher level leadership position? The response is likely to require some strategic planning in addition to understanding why people leave in the first place (Johnson & Luecke, 2006). Johnson and Luecke (2006) suggested the following approach:

Rather than waiting for a turnover crisis, proactively determine which valued players are most at risk for leaving, and calculate their departure's impact on the organization. Target retention initiatives to at-risk groups. Also, ask key employees why they stay—then reinforce the positives while eliminating anything

that frustrates them. Hold “stay interviews” every six months for at-risk employees. (p. 216)

To retain potential leaders, organizations can identify the individual career goals of those being hired, conduct initial screenings of incoming entry-level employees (Colarusso et al., 2010), and provide them with quality continuing educational opportunities (Brack, 2012). The educational opportunities can come through the promise of funding undergraduate course work or even in the form of cash payments (Colarusso et al., 2010). Having flexibility is important because it allows organizations the leverage to cater to the attitudes, decisions, and behaviors involved in employees’ personal career plans, which is more likely to ensure employee commitment to his or her career within that organization (Rohrbaugh & Shim, 2011). Having the ability to be flexible is, after all, a communal request of the millennial generation (Brack, 2012).

The SES has continued to struggle to recruit and retain the necessary qualified people for many years. Carey (2012) concluded that part of the reason is due to the federal government’s passive position on recruiting. Others argue that agencies tend to fill their SES positions from within before looking outside the agency for qualified candidates (Little, 2007; Partnership for Public Service, 2009). Yet, for others, the problem is magnified as just the opposite occurs (Cappelli, 2008; Fernandez-Araoz, Groysberg, & Nohria, 2009). Currently, however, it remains that agencies work to improve candidates from within their own ranks, “so that when they choose to hire from within, the individual [will] be more prepared for the SES” (Carey, 2012, p. 15).

Koonce (2010) believed that the future success and retention of an organization’s leadership occurs in direct proportion to the effective implementation of leadership-development programs. However, retaining desirable leaders is not easy (Colarusso et al.,

2010). Therefore, in order to be ready for tomorrow's leaders, Benko and Weisberg (2008) offered that organizations may need to restructure their expectations and processes. Those in favor of restructuring the SES program suggest that doing so would allow "SES recruiting efforts to pay more attention to the talent pipeline within the government, develop the skills of individuals who are likely to serve as future senior executives, and identify qualified individuals to bring on as senior executives" (Carey, 2012, p. 15).

Theoretical Framework

As with many aspects of life (e.g., business, education) what is actually seen and evident is often, metaphorically (Blasko, 1999), only the apex of what lies beneath (Finkelstein, 2012). For example, only an eighth of an iceberg's total mass is all that is seen above the water (U.S. Coast Guard, 2014). The root system that anchors and nourishes certain species of trees can spread wider and deeper than the actual trunk and branches seen from the surface (Canadell et al., 1996). Moreover, massive footings must be driven deep into the earth in order to support the structural weight of large skyscrapers (Landau & Condit, 1996). To get to the potential root cause, or solution (Gano, 2008), of the phenomenon (i.e., the level at which employees qualify for executive positions is the level at which fewer employees are applying for those positions), there is a need to go, metaphorically, below the surface.

The interconnected dynamics of an organization's capabilities with the process of advancement toward the executive levels is a theoretical model introduced by Harvard Business School professors Clayton Christensen and Stephen Kaufmann (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008) and has been adapted for the context of a DoD agency. The model is one that executives of an agency or other organization can follow to help with strategic-

planning initiatives. The model can also empower executives with an understanding of how to assess the organization's capabilities and how those capabilities can contribute (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008) to enabling employees to ascend to elevated organizational levels.

Capabilities. The capabilities of an organization encompass the organizational capacity and expertise to create a product, service, or process at a high level of performance. It requires the integration, coordination, and cooperation of many individuals and teams. A “capability is more than just current performance; it is the ability to learn, innovate, and create” (Marquardt, 2011, p. 123). Together, they are the resources, processes, and priorities (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008) that become the strategic structure of the enterprise. If an organization struggles to successfully implement and maintain strategic initiatives, it is usually because the organization is missing one of these critical capabilities (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Yet, as organizations strategically take a good, long, deep look at their internal capabilities and identify their own strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and resources, all the while constantly looking for benchmarks and opportunities to improve (Marquardt, 2011), then they are less likely to fail with growth and retention initiatives (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008):

1. Resources. The first capability of an organization is its resources, which are composed of elements such as people, cash, equipment, technology, customers, suppliers, (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008), and time (Hall & Hord, 2011). Resources are flexible (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008) and can be looked at as dimensions of performance and potential (Goffee & Jones, 2006). They are the select, focused, strategic activities (Johnson & Luecke, 2006) that people and organizations “draw on to accomplish desired results” (Covey, 2013, p. 183).

When determining what resources are needed and how they should be utilized, it is important to consider the long-term needs of the organization rather than solely the short-term needs (Johnson & Luecke, 2006). This is one reason why leaders of organizations are cautioned to use resources wisely, selectively, and not on trivial issues (Gabarro & Kotter, 2011). Another important reason is that not all resources are renewable, and those that are may not remain so if poorly managed (Meadows, 2008). This is a crucial time for government to attract essential talent, but experts in various government sectors are concerned the necessary recruiting resources are not available (Neal, 2014).

Therefore, senior leaders should build flexibility into their plans and reallocate resources, if needed, to areas and people in the organization who have the opportunities and strengths most needed to successfully execute the strategy (Johnson & Luecke, 2006). Yet, some organizational leaders tend to look at human resources differently than they do physical or financial resources, often to their own detriment (Goffee & Jones, 2006). It takes time to effectively plan (Hall & Hord, 2011; Tallerico, 2005), develop, and grow (Goffee & Jones, 2006) any resource, human or otherwise, that is important to the future of an organization. Goffee and Jones (2006) stated the following:

It is in the careful and gradual nurturing and the sustained celebration of regular performers [not in the] “star” cultures [of] celebrated individual high achievers that leaders are often able to achieve their greatest long-term impact. The regular performers are the backbone of any organization, the people who keep the show on the road, the team that keeps you in business. And they are performing to the limits of their potential. What more can we expect? Shouldn’t this be the aspiration for *everyone* in an organization? The very best leaders understand this and are prepared to invest the time required to enable the learners to flourish and to celebrate the achievements of the regular performers. (p. 184)

Christensen and Kaufman (2008) shared that organizations that are not as dependent on their resources are more likely to find success by applying greater focus on their

processes instead, which is the next capability.

2. Processes. A department or agency may need more than just a leadership-development program. Instead, administrators may benefit from implementing a leadership-qualification process that is “built into the holistic system and permeates every layer of the organization” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2004, p. 234). In the context of this study, the current process is that of position advancement or lack of it. When putting together a high-level action plan, senior leaders develop a process that focuses on the organization’s top future priorities (Johnson & Luecke, 2006). If they understand what needs to happen to build and retain leaders, then they will “design a process that continually builds leadership that gets results” (Goleman et al., 2004, p. 233) by making the retention of talented managers and employees a top priority (Johnson & Luecke, 2006).

Processes convert resources into products and services (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). They are the method behind how products are researched, budgeted, developed, and marketed (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). They are emergent in context (Northouse, 2013) and are “often used interchangeably with terms such as format, program, models, approach, delivery, or activities” (Tallerico, 2005, p. 132). Whereas resources allow flexibility, processes do not (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008).

Processes grow into habits (Covey, 2013) that then become an organization’s culture (Hall & Hord, 2011). They evolve over time through a series of sequential steps toward reaching a planned destination (Ralston & Wilson, 2006) that do not allow for shortcuts to occur (Covey, 2013). Similar to a mathematical equation, if the formula is not followed exactly, the desired result will fail to be precise. Experimenting to get the precise result does, however, allow for independence and innovation (Ralston & Wilson,

2006) because there could be multiple processes and multiple ways they could be applied and modified (Tallerico, 2005). Yet, some government organizations may lack the necessary independence because their policies and processes are tied to higher level strategies that come from higher level departments (Bruff, 2009; Foote, 1988).

3. Priorities. Organizational priorities, the third capability, are the structural context and “strategic needs subject to top management control, which are the principal influences on the processes of definition, impetus, and business planning” (Bower, 1986, p. 294). They are the goals and activities that are of greatest worth to people and organizations (Covey, 2013). If a goal cannot be prioritized, it will fail (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Priorities are determined with the mindset of good, better, best (Oaks, 2007) yet always maintaining the awareness that “the enemy of ‘best’ is often the ‘good’” (Covey, 2013, p. 165). This is true for both organizations and individuals (Collins, 2001).

Is this why many employees do not progress into executive-level leadership roles (Compton, 2008), even though some of them may qualify (Sherman & Freas, 2004) because they settle for good instead of best, indicating that advancement is perhaps not a true priority to them (Christensen & McCall, 2006)? On the other hand, maybe it is a priority, but they are not aware of the training and advancement opportunities available to them (Montgomery, 2012) or how to access them because providing that knowledge and training (Montgomery, 2012; OPM, 2008) is not a true priority (Rossett, 1989).

Additional analyses into the issue may also be needed, such as the relationship between personality and performance (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002), gender differences (Hyde & Else-Quest, 2013), characterizations of diversity (111th Congress, 2009), employee motivation (Herzberg, 1986), and additional insight into personnel psychology (Lawler, 1969). However, the details of that analysis are currently beyond the scope of

this particular study.

People and organizations fail to organize and execute around balanced priorities because their priorities have not become deeply planted in their hearts and minds (Covey, 2013), particularly those in the C-suite (Goleman et al., 2004). If it is not a priority of the chief executive officer's agenda, then certainly it will not be the priority of anyone else's agenda (Goleman et al., 2004). For example, if responsibilities for handling leadership-development initiatives are funneled solely through the human-resources department (DCMA, 2009), then a clear message is sent that such initiatives are a low priority of top executives, namely the chief executive officer (Goleman et al., 2004). The executive level is the primary determinant of focused priorities; therefore, if priorities change even a slight degree, then the primary areas of focus throughout the various management levels will also change (Bower, 1986).

Culture. Culture is the emotional reality of an organization (Goleman et al., 2004). As the capabilities of resources, processes, and priorities are successfully implemented and the organization grows, a defined and dedicated culture will emerge and be necessary to make regular important decisions (Christensen & Shu, 2006). However, this dedicated culture can also be a detriment if sizeable course corrections are needed (Christensen & Shu, 2006). Changing an organization's culture can require the difficult task of changing "the collective habits of the whole organization" (Goleman et al., 2004, p. 230).

For that change to occur, the strategic direction of the organization also needs to change (Schein, 1988). Therefore, if an organization were facing change, it would be beneficial to assess whether the resources required to create successful change are even available (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Then, a determination can be made to assess

whether the current processes are sufficient to produce the desired change and whether the current priorities will produce the visibility the change initiatives require (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008).

As organizations mature and processes become habit (Covey, 2013), an enduring culture develops (Carini & Dunn, 2013). In order for the organization to ensure success, priorities must be securely instilled (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Often the groundwork for culture and organizational priorities is initially laid by the founding leaders (Boin, 2008); therefore changing them, if needed, can be difficult. Christensen and Kaufman (2008) stated the following:

When an organization's capabilities reside primarily in its people, change is relatively simple to manage. But when the capabilities have come to reside in its processes and [priorities] and especially when they have become embedded in culture, change can be extraordinarily difficult. (p. 5)

To develop a successful continuous learning and development culture, a senior executive leader must realize his or her responsibility as role models for improving that culture (OPM, 2007). If leaders want to ensure a healthy culture (Rothwell, Stavros, Sullivan, & Sullivan, 2010), such as developing and retaining qualified leaders from the entry-level to the SES level, then clear communication (Rothwell et al., 2010) and close management (Brightman & Moran, 2001) of the priorities and processes may be needed.

A study by Cornerstone on Demand (2014) found that nearly 80% of federal executives think management culture is one of the greatest setbacks to accomplishing organizational objectives, which is an indication that something needs to change (Moore, 2014). The thoughts, attitudes, traditions, values, and rules held by supporters of an organization contribute to the overall culture (DeBerry, 2010; McNeal, 2009), and successful leaders are able to use this to their advantage (Christensen & Shu, 2006). To

do this, executive leaders should recognize their obligation as exemplars for improving that culture (OPM, 2007) yet understand that even a course correction in the form of a directive from executive levels will not necessarily mean an endeavor will be successful (Defense Technical Information Center, 2009, 2013; Goleman et al., 2004).

When is it apparent that an organization's culture is successful? Christensen and Kaufman (2008) suggested it is when employees feel they are able to "act autonomously but cohesively" (p. 5) and there is a "significant history of togetherness" (Christensen & Shu, 2006, p. 2). Employees need training to make autonomous prioritization decisions that are in line with the organization's mission (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). For leaders to be ultimately successful, they need to understand how to lead their own self (Caruthers, 2011). Petrie (2011) stated, "People's motivation to grow is highest when they feel a sense of autonomy over their own development" (p. 17). This method is likely to work better for those who are already ambitious to learn and grow (Petrie, 2011). The theory of self-leadership suggests that leaders will identify how to lead others effectively only after successful identification and demonstration of leadership within themselves. The difficulty can occur when trying to establish a culture of shared leadership among intelligent leadership networks and confusing "leadership culture with leadership program" (Petrie, 2011, p. 26).

Various styles of leadership can also affect an organization's culture. In the DoD, there are many traditional leadership styles considered transactional. Transactional leadership is more of a tit for tat, "You give me this, I'll give you that!" mentality (Burns, 2010). However, the changing demographics of the DoD are having a noticeable impact on the transition of leadership styles (Caruthers, 2011). Leadership is becoming less Machiavellian (Hoyle, 2007) and more transformational (Burns, 2010; Covey, 2013;

Hoyle, 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Northouse, 2013). The younger generation entering the workforce expects 21st-century, transformational leadership (Caruthers, 2011).

Therefore, successful change is beginning to occur within organizations as the transactional leadership style effectively transitions to a transformational leadership style (Caruthers, 2011). However, time will be the determining factor for any type of successful transfer (Antonakis, Day, & Schyns, 2012; DeMarrais, Lyso, & Watkins, 2011). Additionally, strategically implementing a successful and enduring leadership-centered culture will require patience and steadfast support from senior management (Crawford, 2005).

Advancing Advancement

There seems to be the notion that barriers will not have much effect or that the obscuring roadblocks to opportunity will be less likely to hinder professional progress if an employee has the necessary qualifications for advancement (Baxter, Stephens, & Thayer-Bacon, 2011; Huijskens, Hoosharian, Scherpbier, & Van Der Horst, 2010). Yet, there are those who would like to progress to become an agency executive but cannot obtain the level of necessary qualifications because the road is paved with obstacles of obscurity and uncertainty (Baxter et al., 2011; Mackay & Ross, 2014; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006). Even so, there is the potential that the closer an employee gets to qualifying for executive-level positions, the more likely he or she is to refuse the position (Shellenbarger, 2013).

Implementing leadership development and succession planning into an agency's strategic initiatives can be an effective step toward improvement if it is kept as a priority. In a recent study by Cornerstone on Demand (2014) of human-capital managers, 60% of

them cited recruiting people with the right skills for the right job as one of their top three priorities for 2014, yet only 46% were currently investing in projects related to hiring employees with the right skills for the job. Additionally, “only 4% of agencies view their succession planning efforts as successful” (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014, p. 10). Therefore, agencies are claiming that leadership advancement is an important strategic goal, but are doing little to achieve the goal.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014) reported, “Today’s federal jobs require more advanced skills at higher grade levels than federal jobs in years past” (p. 4) and, fortunately for senior and executive level employees, they historically receive the greater amount of training opportunities (Crawford, 2005). However, scholars suggest that many executive leadership-development programs have become casual, experimental (DeMarrais et al., 2011), limited (Koonce, 2010), and lacking the necessary measures that lead to successful program implementation (Leigh, Penney, & Shapiro, 2010). Additional research indicates there is a lack of investment in development opportunities (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014). The result is shortfalls in procurement of adequate executive leadership (Koonce, 2010) and wasted time, effort, and money for both the individual and the organization (DeMarrais et al., 2011).

The economy plays a role in the availability of skilled leaders and training opportunities, especially during times of economic difficulty. It is a common belief that when budgets are minimized, so are personnel training and development opportunities (Ronayne, 2007). However, even in periods of economic downturn, the availability of highly skilled federal employees remains crucial to the successful development of organizational leadership (Koonce, 2010). During prosperous years, some organizations strain to operate efficiently (Middlehurst, 2010). Therefore, in a struggling economy,

organizations have to put forth even more effort to provide for leadership assets that are sorely needed. Some leaders of organizations are not adapting well to changes created from the recent economic turmoil (Casserley, 2011). In hard financial times, the chief learning officer needs to be able to justify the need for, and existence of, training (Moore, 2013). Although budget constraints make their job difficult, chief learning officers should be strongly utilized.

The pathway for preparing employees to become future managers and successful leaders can become elusive and disorganized if the essential tools are not available (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2011). The resources necessary for leaders to progress in their fields may not be available, or the leaders are not aware of the opportunities to use the tools and resources (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2011). Even if resources for the programs are available, just having those resources may not be enough to solve current leadership related issues (Koonce, 2010).

Identifying and Developing Capable Leaders

How efficiently and effectively are agencies engaging, developing, and preparing the current and future workforce (Devlin, 2014)? Ensuring successful progression of employees up to and into the executive suite may depend on both the individual who has aspirations for advancement (Goleman et al., 2004) and the current agency executive leadership who defines the policy (Montgomery, 2012) that determines how individuals advance. The purpose is to ensure employees at all levels within the agency have an opportunity for and access to leadership-development training because eventually nearly everyone, no matter the level of employment, is placed in a position to lead (Crawford, 2005).

Enabling employees to advance is good, but not all employees are necessarily fit

for leadership (Burns, 2010). That is why it is important to identify the type of leaders needed for executive positions (Colarusso et al., 2010) and then provide them with the necessary guidance to ensure they are capable of being the next generation of executive leaders (Caruthers, 2011). Both the employee and employer need to take responsibility for development (Smith et al., 2012).

Perhaps a fundamental problem with determining who leads and who leaves is the selection process (Howard, 2001). Candidates are often selected for programs based on their highly qualified track record (OPM, 2012) only to falter (Conger, Nadler, Strategy, & Governance, 2012; Liu, 2010) or make a rapid exit once they reach the C-suite (Lattin, 2013). The solution may be in finding those who are willing to continue learning how to learn (Brophy, 2010) from their own experience (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Bion, 2004) as well as the experiences of others (Argote, 2005).

Employees who are eager to learn, try new things, and be humble are those who are more likely to be successful regardless of the task (Christensen & McCall, 2006). Additionally, “the proficiency to learn from experience is one of the most powerful predictors of success when a manager confronts a new job” (Christensen & McCall, 2006, p. 7). Those in charge of hiring should not necessarily look for what candidates have already learned but, instead, that they are able to learn (Christensen & McCall, 2006). However, there is a difference between learning about the concept of leadership and actually applying the concepts through development initiatives.

Are organizations advancing the wrong senior leaders or simply failing to provide them with the right development (Colarusso & Lyle, 2014)? Christensen and McCall (2006) stated, “Organizations develop people whether they mean to or not and whether or not they have formal development programs in place” (p. 3). Essentially, organizations

really have two choices: They can draw on employment resources external to the organization or they can develop them internally (Christensen & McCall, 2006). During times of leadership shortages, organizations tend to comb the industry and hire from outside the organization. Yet, what if the talent pool was already created and ready, right under their nose, within their own agency (Christensen & McCall, 2006)? Colarusso and Lyle (2014) suggested managers and senior leaders make an effort to discover talent within their organization and then place trainers, mentors, or coaches in situations to help the talent continuously improve.

When implementing a leadership-development program, too often, they are simply executive education classes focused on engaging people in learning topical content from experts. Although important, no discrete program focused on topical content from experts will add up to transformation of the person or the company (Goleman et al., 2004). Governments, universities, corporations, and other organizations around the world present effective leadership-development training courses and other similar development opportunities that often tend to follow the case method and problem-based learning.

These world-class organizations allocate significant resources to training programs and team-building activities, which is done in an attempt to connect new and existing knowledge and ensure ongoing learning by the organization, its individual members, and its teams. Ellis and LeMay (2008) suggested that training programs should be implemented in a way that all individuals and teams are given opportunities to confront the organizational challenges and then lead through those challenges while receiving support from upper levels of leadership. Just because it is a challenge does not necessarily mean they will learn from it (Christensen & McCall, 2006). Therefore, individual adaptations may be necessary.

The Partnership for Public Service (2012) found that 73% of emerging leaders expect to benefit from professional-development opportunities, including exposure to agency leaders, 77% expect leadership-skills training, 82% expect training on technical skills, and 62% expect to have a mentor. These figures demonstrate highly motivated individuals' expectations for effective development. Chief executive officers are to set the example of strong leadership development by ensuring a format is in place for instructing rising leaders who are internal to the organization (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). In addition, a recent leadership study suggests leadership-development programs lack the measures necessary to evaluate effectively the needs of organizations, thereby becoming difficult to develop and implement the program (Leigh et al., 2010).

Colarusso and Lyle (2014) asked, "How do we ensure that we are developing our leaders and managing their talents for the betterment of both themselves and the institution" (p. 33)? Scholars suggest relying on proven leadership competencies, styles, and traits (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004) and assessing participants' history, the work atmosphere, and the means essential for the development of a good program design (Burke & Hutchins, 2007). Then, once a participant's level of competency has been assessed, he or she is placed in a program designed to provide participants with a tailored approach to leadership opportunities that fit his or her abilities (Bink & Cage, 2012; Dyer & Schaefer, 2012).

However, that alone is not enough. Christensen and McCall (2006) offered clarification that the potential of participants "should not be measured through the demonstration of acquired attributes, but rather by the demonstration of the ability to acquire the attributes needed for future situations" (p. 5). It seems the contemporary view of competencies is for leaders to focus on getting the right people together and helping to

inspire them to move forward on a prescribed visionary path (Yüksel, 2008). Leaders need to be able to “learn what needs to be learned from the experiences in which the high-potential employee will be schooled in the future” (Christensen & McCall, 2006, p. 5). The idea of identifying and developing the talent of capable leaders is an ongoing process that may require continuous refining.

Developing Leaders for the Department of Defense

Federal military leaders at the senior level have a high percentage rate of attaining an executive-level position in the private sector when they leave the military (Lewis & Oh, 2008). There are many reasons employees may advance into higher level leadership positions (Craig, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008), and one of them is a result of their level or type of education or both. Mid-level employees support organizational leadership-development programs because they are looking for ways to gain training, tenure, and experience in order to improve performance (Lewis & Oh, 2008). Most DoD leaders who advance into executive leadership roles, whether in the military services or civilian ranks, have graduate degrees (Lewis & Oh, 2008). Lewis and Oh (2008) concluded that, should the DoD rehire retired military personnel as civilians with significant experience, the performance of the entire organization could improve.

The military has historically concentrated on the development of individuals regardless of the impact to the overall organization (Lewis & Oh, 2008). This often comes from DoD leaders’ ability to appeal to a sense of duty and mission, enabling subordinates to feel more needed as a contributing participant. Additionally, leadership training in the military often results in short job rotations (Lewis & Oh, 2008). However, in the civilian arena, an effective design for a leadership-development program occurs when participants are able to connect their level of job function with the greater mission

of the organization (Burke & Hutchins, 2007).

In a study by the Partnership for Public Service (2012), members of the Presidential Management Fellows Program, class of 2011, were surveyed to determine various aspects of the leadership-development program. The design of the program was intended to allure individuals with an aptitude for federal service. The study effectively showed that overall workplace satisfaction was decided by how well initial work assignments were matched to the individual's talents and needs and how fellows' own aspirations accurately matched the expectations of the workplace environment (Partnership for Public Service, 2012).

The executive leaders of the DoD have the unique concern of ensuring that their organizations can effectively protect the safety and interests of the people of the United States (Lewis & Oh, 2008). As a result, the size of the executive leader department is greater than any other department in the federal government (Lewis & Oh, 2008). In general, executive-level DoD leaders oversee more than two million members of the military and more than 600,000 civilians. In a testimony before the Armed Services committee, Farrell and Hutton (2011) stated, "Effective human capital planning can enable DoD to have the right people, with the right skills, doing the right jobs, in the right places, at the right time by making flexible use of its internal workforce" (p. 2).

In a study by the Partnership for Public Service (2011), new government employees under the age of 30 years old were polled regarding their overall employment satisfaction. The three agencies that ranked at the top for being a satisfying place to work were the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The DoD ranked number 19 of 26 agencies (Partnership for Public Service, 2011).

Public versus Private Leadership Development

The leadership structure of an organization is a key element to the functionality of the organization and dictates the opportunities available for leadership development (DeBerry, 2010). Effective leadership-development programs should facilitate opportunities for personal growth at all levels (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2011). However, adequate training and assessment programs are not always available to potential leaders who need it, partly because of the influence of the vertical organizational structure (DeBerry, 2010). One suggestion is to refocus the top-down leadership approach in the federal government to depend more on available “outcome-oriented performance measures and improved data” (Kasdin, 2011, p. 2).

Marquardt (2011) suggested, “Tall, rigid hierarchies with impregnable department silos are a bane to learning because they block the fast and unimpeded flow of knowledge that is essential to being successful” (p. 78). Historically, the vertical organizational structure has enabled stability, yet many structures create gaps in leadership between the top and the bottom (DeBerry, 2010). When the organizational structure is modified, it changes the chain of command, ultimately transforming how leaders lead (Buchen, 2005).

There are various types of leadership-development programs in the public and private sectors that can be implemented to last any amount of time (Ellis & LeMay, 2008). The federal government and the private sector have different understandings of leadership development and how it should be implemented (Koonce, 2010). The Congressional Budget Office (2012) explained that the private and public sectors regularly compete to obtain talented and experienced employees. However, effective leadership-development programs can facilitate opportunities for personal growth at all

sector levels, whether public or private (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2011). The private sector successfully employs leadership training as a means to develop new leaders, whereas the federal government has yet to discover the greater potential of leadership training (Koonce, 2010). Additionally, there are leadership-development programs that exist within the DoD and other federal government agencies at the GS-14 and GS-15 (i.e., senior leader) levels, but there is little knowledge of other programs outside that level (Koonce, 2010).

Core qualifications for SES. In 2014, the *Guide to the Senior Executive Service* identified the key goals of the SES as follows: “Improve the executive management of the government; select and develop a cadre of highly competent senior executives with leadership and managerial expertise; and hold executives accountable for individual and organizational performance” (OPM, 2014c, p. 2). In an earlier version of the guide, there were additional goals (OPM, 2001), but they were removed in later editions. All guides explain that the SES functions from a set of executive core qualifications. These qualifications are separate from those mentioned previously (i.e., outside experience, formal education, mobility, and executive training). Instead, executive core qualifications are essentially core competencies used by selecting officials to determine a candidate’s knowledge and experience. The OPM (2010) reported the following:

The first set of executive qualifications, established at the beginning of the SES, remained in effect until 1994, when they were completely overhauled to reflect developments in executive competencies over time. OPM found that it needed to revise them again in September 1997, as a result of the rapidly-changing management environment and the need to focus increasingly on leadership and the ability to drive change.” (OPM, 2001, p.8) Later, the ECQs from 1997 “were revalidated and reissued with a few modifications in 2006. In their current form, they represent the best thinking of organizational psychologists, human resources professionals both at OPM and other agencies, and Senior Executives themselves. (p. 1)

Since 2001, the executive core qualifications have remained the same. They are leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions (OPM, 2001, 2010, 2012).

Candidate-development programs for SES. For employees who discover the executive pathway, the Federal Executive Institute is one of two institutions that offer “leadership and management development programs for all levels of leadership from team leaders to senior executives” (OPM, 2014c, p. 26) Through these institutions, candidates can participate in various SES candidate-development programs (OPM, 2014e). Graduates of candidate-development programs whose executive qualifications are certified by a qualifications review board are eligible for noncompetitive career appointment to the SES (OPM, 2001).

In a 2009 study by the Partnership for Public Service, the quality of the SES organization was analyzed. Results of the study suggested the standards of the present workplace are fundamentally different from those of 30 years earlier when Congress created the SES. Much of this is due to generational differences and advancements in technology. What is most astounding is the study’s assertion that “the original vision of the SES was never realized” (Partnership for Public Service, 2009, p. i). Additional points of interest include the finding that “the senior executive hiring process is broken, time consuming, complicated, and requires too many lengthy written essays, and little value is added by having a centralized qualification review board” (Partnership for Public Service, 2009, p. ii). Therefore, in November 2010, President Barak Obama instituted new reform to the hiring practices for potential senior executives as an attempt to try to curb the hiring issues (Adams & Kelley, 2011).

The study intensely highlighted that “candidate development programs are not

strategically linked to succession planning; onboarding programs to help new executives adjust are rare; and development programs for senior executives are decentralized, lack coordination and are inadequate” (Partnership for Public Service, 2009, p. ii). The study also found that the organization desires to develop a job environment that employees aspire to be a part of, yet it continues to fall short of that goal (Partnership for Public Service, 2009).

Onboarding. A 2008 study by the Partnership for Public Service defined onboarding as “the process of integrating and acculturating new employees into the organization and providing them with the tools, resources and knowledge to become successful and productive” (Partnership for Public Service, 2008, p. 2). Results of the study indicated inconsistencies with the onboarding method in federal agencies. It is important for the new employee to make a good impression the first day, week, and month, but it is also just as important for the organization to which he or she was hired to do the same. Following the 2008 study by the Partnership for Public Service, the OPM in 2011 submitted a business case for executive onboarding. The OPM identified derailers to a successful executive onboarding program, which include no written plan, no ownership by human resources, no continuous-improvement component, no best-practice sharing, no data-based decision making, and delays in offering onboarding (OPM, 2011).

Navy supplemental handbook. The U.S. Navy developed a supplemental handbook that helps employees assess their readiness and prepares them for the SES (Secretary of the Navy, 2012). Current SES members provided information for the handbook. The handbook states, “Many people strive to become a member of the SES as their careers in public service progress. However, few actually take a systematic approach to preparing for and ultimately applying to the SES” (Secretary of the Navy, 2012, p. 3).

The handbook then explains that the OPM's *Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications* is the source for understanding the executive qualifications and competencies necessary to enter the SES. The handbook provides critical advice into developing the SES application, shows how the executive core qualifications fit into the application, and offers additional leadership traits essential to an applicant's success (Secretary of the Navy, 2012).

The handbook succinctly highlights specific areas of expertise for developing a broader perspective. Rotational assignments, mentorships, and executive-training institutions are emphasized. Additionally, the handbook guides participants through the resume, application, and interviewing process. Essentially, the handbook is a simple 15-page, one-stop-shop resource that leads employees through the SES application process from beginning to end. It assists in removing the barriers that could unnecessarily slow the advancement process (Secretary of the Navy, 2012).

Summary

There is a great deal of research and literature available that discusses who the successful leaders are in history (Eckmann, 2005; Raico, 2010). The literature examines what is required to successfully advance as a leader (Burns, 2010; Covey, 2013; Goleman et al., 2004), when the right time is to lead and progress (Johnson & Luecke, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Northouse, 2013), and where successful executives receive their training (Ramakrishnan, 2008; Yaverbaum, 2004). The research also shares why leadership is important (Burns, 2010; Clawson, 2012; Collins, 2001; Goffee & Jones, 2006) and how being an executive leader can bring about great changes (Covey, 2013; Goleman, 2011). However, there is a dearth of research that explains why highly qualified and eligible people do not advance into vacant executive-level positions.

As the wave of baby boomers advance up and out of the executive ranks, gaps are created. The next generations, Generation X and the millennials, are next in line to fill the gaps, but they are having difficulty doing so. Understanding how to gain access to the training, tools, and resources required for federal executive positions can be somewhat unclear, thus presenting barriers for aspiring leaders. Some of the barriers may be due to policy, whereas others may be due to the perspectives of current leaders. A determining factor to understanding the cause for the lack of ascendancy to the C-suite may rest in the organization's capabilities. The resources, processes, and priorities have also been considered. Together, each plays a role in developing the hard-to-change organizational culture. There have been explanations provided to help illuminate the interwoven connections between government agencies and the federal government as a whole and the influences that one has on the other. Advancing advancement for the next generation of federal work could occur by shifting to a networked organizational and educational structure.

Research Questions

The central question used to explore this research study and attempt to provide a better understanding of the basic phenomenon was as follows: Why are gaps in executive level positions not being filled as expected? Following this question are two subquestions used in an effort to narrow the focus of the central question into specific terms:

1. To what extent do employees' perceptions of opportunities for advancement into executive-level positions align with current program policy?
2. What effect do an agency's capabilities have on the concepts of position qualification and position refusal?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

This chapter outlines the methodology that was used to identify and understand current roadblocks to leadership development and career path advancement into the executive levels of an organizational structure. An inductive qualitative study was conducted to determine why gaps in executive level positions are not being filled as expected. The general approach to this study was to combine the ideas of position qualification and position refusal into a reliable theory by delving deeper into the causality of the phenomenon. Therefore, an inquiry was made into the personal perspectives of employees at varying levels throughout the agency regarding the constructs that could affect ascension into executive leadership ranks.

Expanding upon previous observations and correlations, a systematic grounded-theory design was used to conduct this research through the use of memos, coding techniques, categorical analysis, and comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The principal reason was to generate new theoretical constructs rather than conducting research by repeatedly testing old theories (Birks & Mills, 2011) or being bogged down by the constraints of existing “grand theories” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Corbin and Strauss (1990) affirmed that the purpose of grounded theory “seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions, and to the consequences of their actions. It is the researcher’s responsibility to catch this interplay” (p. 419). A systematic design was used simply for verification purposes (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013) because “research generating theory goes hand in hand with verifying it” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). The systematic design includes the use of a three-stage coding method (i.e., open, axial, and selective),

and the explanations are shared later.

One of the primary steps in developing theory involves identifying correlations between categories (Creswell, 2008; Goertz, 2003). Contrasting and correlating data are only part of the solution (Ziliak & McCloskey, 2008) to developing good theory. At the heart of theory development is the establishment of causality or of determining the causal mechanism that links inputs and outputs (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015). After phenomena are observed and measured, it is important to understand the processes involved and the movement of the phenomena over time (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015). To do this, constructs are developed. Christensen and Sundahl (2015) stated the following:

Constructs are high-level abstractions that enable us to visualize how the phenomena work, how they have impact, and how they evolve over time. Whereas data gives a static view of the phenomena, a construct gives a sense for the dynamics. Constructs make it possible for researchers to articulate causality—of what causes what, and why. When causality is understood, researchers can categorize things again—in a way that enables them to make if-then statements (p. 6)

By identifying the constructs and understanding the processes involved, the causal condition becomes more recognizable (Charmaz, 2006; Goodman, Ullman, & Tenenbaum, 2011), prompting the ability to explore further into the essence of the problem. The theory can then be categorized and applied to various circumstances (Von Bertalanffy, 1950).

A careful review of the information shared in the literature and initial investigations present an introductory foundation from which to build and direct the development of the theory (Charmaz, 2006). A description of the methods used to conduct the research provides a greater explanation of evidences discovered through initial investigations, a description of the research setting and sampling strategy, and

outlining the approaches to data collection and analysis. Throughout the sections of this chapter, ethical considerations are shared to describe the efforts that were made to preserve anonymity, ensure documents are kept secure, and highlight other areas of attention. The results of the research support the research questions (Creswell, 2008) and the implications of the results may well indicate there is potential for additional research to be conducted on the subject.

Initial Research

One particular DoD agency had noticed a trend in the decline of employees seeking federal executive positions. This agency, hereafter referred to as Agency X, noticed that employees, internal to the agency, were not progressing into higher levels of management and leadership responsibilities at the rate needed to fill looming employment gaps. A description of the initial research with Agency X is shared prior to explaining the next phase in the methodology for the study. It is the results of the initial research that influenced the reasoning and ultimately the methodological direction of the study.

As Charmaz (2006) shared, before conducting research, researchers are likely to “already have a sound footing in their disciplines” (p. 17). For purposes of full disclosure, as the researcher of this study, the researcher has been a member of Agency X for over 10 years, and, over the course of the previous 3 years, he collected evidence that offer salient insight into understanding better the processes and movement of the phenomenon over time. As a result, helpful data and initial themes (Charmaz, 2006) emerged. The interviewing and coding methods for this study were used to improve upon the information found in the initial research.

Informal conversations with coworkers regarding the topics of leadership,

development, and progression into executive levels created the early foundation of this study. These formative conversations indicated there were more questions to be asked, or questions that did not appear to have clear answers. Some of the initial questions were as follows: Why is there not employee progression into higher level job vacancies? What could be affecting the progression? Is there a prescribed pathway to the executive levels? If so, where can the information be found? What, if any, promotable credentials are needed? Therefore, an inspection of the current literature was a logical next step. The evidence discovered in the literature indicated a universal problem throughout the federal government. Therefore, in an effort to corroborate the evidence uncovered in the literature in Agency X and to answer the questions raised in informal conversations with coworkers, a draft survey (see Appendix A) was piloted with a few employees at various functional levels within the agency.

The researcher initially piloted a draft survey with 10 employees of varying GS-levels and ages at one geographic location in July 2013. These employees were members of the researcher's functional team due to his employment within the agency. All 10 of them responded to the survey. Later, an agency point of contact at headquarters provided 10 additional names and email addresses of agency employees to also take the survey. These employees were from various GS levels and geographic locations. Six of the 10 employees from this second group responded to the survey from October to November 2013.

Responses from the piloted surveys were agreeable with the literature and provided helpful feedback that suggested potential opportunities, or missed opportunities, for employees qualifying for executive-level positions. For example, many of the participants' responses indicated a desire to participate in agency-level leadership-

development programs and that leadership training could enable them to improve in their job function. Yet, feedback also indicated many were unaware of opportunities for leadership training, particularly opportunities that can lead to the executive levels. The views of younger generational employees differed somewhat from those of more seasoned employees, with some employees indicating that executive agency leaders within the agency may not be sincerely interested in lower level employees' professional development or advancement. Additionally, some employees felt there is an assortment of barriers keeping them from progressing. Although not official, the feedback received from these informal surveys was used as notes to help guide the later development of the formal interview protocol (see Appendix B).

During the process of revising the initial survey, the researcher located the professionally developed and tested survey from the Senior Executives Association. In 2009, the Senior Executives Association, in conjunction with Avue Technologies Corporation, conducted a survey with 17 U.S. federal government departments and organizations. The original survey resulted in over 11,790 responses as well as more than 3,700 descriptive comments. This survey had its limitations, such as not including the DoD and only including employees at the GS-14 and GS-15 levels of leadership. The results of the survey by the Senior Executives Association confirmed the research identified in the literature review, the comments from the initial informal conversations, and results of the pilot-tested survey, as well as provided quantitative verification of the apparent dilemma of position qualification and position refusal.

Additionally, during the process of the initial steps in research, the researcher was offered an opportunity to apply to an executive-level training course in the centralized development program. This process provided a greater understanding of the requirements

for the application and approval process, making the researcher an active participant. This experience, as well as the initial information that had been retrieved, laid an excellent foundation from which to progress to the next logical step of conducting participant interviews. It was through the interviewing method that limitations of the initial research were answered.

The initial research addressed descriptions of the lack of employee progression into executive-level positions. Furthermore, the key findings of the initial research indicated a paradox of position qualification and refusal, suggesting that the level at which employees typically qualify for executive positions is the level at which fewer employees are applying for those positions. This implied that employees were refusing to advance into executive vacancies, which is a level at which people traditionally aspire to be (Burns, 2010; Hambrick, 2007; Mills, 2000). In the study, the researcher focused on attempting to understand why gaps in executive-level positions were not being filled as expected by presenting unique perspectives from entry-level, mid-level, senior-level, and executive-level Agency X employees regarding the opportunities for internal-agency advancement into executive-level positions.

General description of the agency. An explanation of the agency's background may help to provide a context for this study. Within the DoD purview falls the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Inspector General, all of the military services (i.e., Air Force, Army, Marines, and Navy), eight Combatant Commands, seven Field Activities, six Joint Service Schools, and 16 Defense Agencies, including Agency X. The agency "is responsible for ensuring that federal acquisition programs, supplies, and services are delivered on time, within cost, and meet performance requirements in support of U.S. war fighters and our allies" (Casey,

Hausmann, Lasley-Hunter, & Martinez, 2011, p. 3). Ross (2012) stated, “Agency professionals serve as ‘information brokers’ and in-plant representatives for military, federal and allied government buying agencies, both during the initial stages of the acquisition cycle and throughout the life of the resulting contracts” (p. 5).

Agency X has undergone various revisions throughout its history, beginning in 1960, when particular federal functional responsibilities, necessary to oversee the government’s acquisition process (DCMA, 2014a), were combined from military and civilian services (McDonnell, 2000). The Defense Management Review Decision 916 of 1989 (McDonnell, 2000) advocated that the entire oversight of the contract administration of the acquisition process be rolled up into a defense command within the Defense Logistics Agency. The contract administration functions of the Defense Logistics Agency continued to grow and expand until September 27, 2000, when the command was formally established as an independent agency within the DoD (DCMA, 2014a). As of May 2014, the agency had approximately 11,500 civilians (Mosher, 2014) and 550 military employees working from 47 geographic offices in more than 740 locations worldwide (DCMA, 2014a). There were approximately 500 entry-level intern employees. Of the overall employee count, 27 were senior leaders. Of those senior leaders, 11 belonged to the SES (DCMA, 2014a).

Implementing leadership development into the agency’s strategic initiatives may be an important step toward improvement, but is it really a priority? In the 2014-2015 strategic management plan, the director of Agency X emphasized the importance of focusing on enduring principles meant to last well beyond the regular changes in organizational leadership. The executive leaders of Agency X outlined a framework of 10 strategic business priorities. Four of the priorities (i.e., recruit, hire, develop, and retain)

are applicable to the purposes of this research. Regarding employee development, the agency's stated priority is to "implement the policies and programs that span the employee career lifecycle" (DCMA, 2013b, p. 17) through a strategic partnership with the Defense Acquisition University, position-based training, and by developing and implementing an agency leadership development program (DCMA, 2013b). The purpose for position-based training is to "accurately identify training requirements far enough in advance to realize appropriate resourcing levels" (DCMA, 2013b, p. 17). Further explanation reveals the following:

Leadership development programs will be revitalized into a focused and clearly articulated career guide. A leadership development continuum will be developed and implemented that is aligned with the Agency's needs, that ensures competency development throughout an employee's career, that's affordable, executable, relevant, promotes, and encourages appropriate leadership skills for the entire workforce throughout their career. (DCMA, 2013b, p.17)

It was undetermined whether this development included a path to SES or only as high as the GS-14 and GS-15 levels, but the agency recognizes the generational differences and the potential skills gaps within the agency (DCMA, 2013b). The progression paradox may have occurred, in part, due to the large size of the agency, with nearly 11,500-plus employees (Mosher, 2014). It is an interesting dilemma that, as an organization grows, its priorities tend to evolve (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). As organizations increase in size, so do their resources, yet they become limited in their ability to participate on the personal levels they were able to when they were smaller. Emphasis then progresses from resources to processes and then to the organization's priorities (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Regardless of its size, an organization can only be successful by making prioritization decisions (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Ideally, those decisions will come from the influencing behavior of the executive levels

(Goleman et al., 2004; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004).

The culture of organizations must continue to evolve to embrace foreseeable changes (Cornerstone on Demand, 2014). Through Agency X's evolution as an initial government project, to a segmented portion of another agency (McDonnell, 2000), to becoming what is now an 11,500-plus employee (Mosher, 2014) independent agency, the initial ideals have more or less remained the same (DCMA, 2009, 2013a). However, independence may be somewhat limited because the agency's policies and processes must align with higher level strategies in the DoD and through acquisition, technology, and logistics (DCMA, 2013a, 2013b), making them not necessarily unique to the agency. Because the agency's culture is so closely tied to the policies, processes, and ideals of high-level federal oversight, it may be difficult to suitably encourage essential future growth and change.

Agency X's recruiting strategy is to "source nationally, hire locally, serve globally, and allow employees to come for a job and stay for a career" (DCMA, 2009, p. 9). In 2009, a portion of this strategy included setting up and maintaining an agency career website and improving flexibility within the selecting and hiring process. Additionally, Agency X appeared to be in the beginning stages of using resources to implement processes for developing employees as potential candidates for executive levels. Although the resources may be changing (DCMA, 2009), overall change in cultural ideals is occurring more slowly (Hall & Hord, 2011). Part of the slowness is the result of policies, regulations, and budgets that come from higher levels of the federal government, which can have a significant influence on an agency's culture (DCMA, 2013a). These influences are then passed on from the inter-agency executive levels down to the lower employee levels (Borg, 2008). Therefore, if internal cultural changes need to

occur, then the agency has to adjust to the various changes placed on it by external influences (DCMA, 2013a; Sweeney, 2014).

In 2009, an evaluation was conducted on Agency X with results indicating the agency could be “viewed as six different agencies without a common language and consistent messaging” (DCMA, 2009, p. 11), suggesting effective communication as a potential barrier to attracting and retaining quality employees. Crawford (2005) stated, “In order to focus on a leader-centered culture, [Agency X] needs to look at leadership somewhat differently than it has in the past” (p. 10). The agency stated the following:

We must encourage employee engagement and develop a culture of mentoring. Senior leaders must fully appreciate generational differences and champion efforts that fully employ a wide array of career development, mentoring, and work-life balance initiatives in order to retain today's more diverse millennial generation. (DCMA, 2013a, p. 18)

The successful implementation of these priorities likely requires an extended focus and effort well beyond the agency’s initial plan for 2 fiscal years (DCMA, 2013a). Although the agency appears to be making some progress regarding leadership development, it may be insufficient to meet the overarching needs for improvements in position qualification and progression.

Effects of an aging workforce on Agency X. Statistical data and analysis, internal to Agency X, paints an interesting picture of the changing demographics of the agency and foreshadows potential changes ahead. In 2010, Agency X submitted a report indicating that a “nearly 33% increase in personnel expected over the next few years, in addition to the growing population of current employees able to, or soon able to, retire from federal service [would] potentially reshape the [agency’s] workforce” (Ross, 2010, p. 14). The agency faces a potential wave of baby-boomer retirements from the workforce. As they leave, vacancies become available. If there are difficulties hiring

employees to fill impending vacancies, often due to unsatisfactory incentives (Katz, 2014), it affects the number of full-time equivalent employees the agency is allotted to hire in a given fiscal period (DCMA, 2012). Therefore, there may be a correlation between the lowering average age of the agency's workforce and the lower numbers of employees progressing into executive-level positions.

In 2011, Jeffries surmised that the average age of leadership within most governmental organizations highlights an imminent threshold in which massive shifts in personnel are likely. That deduction is no different for Agency X (Russell, 2010). For example, in 2010, the average age of the Agency X employee was 51.5 years (Russell, 2010). In 2014, that average had dropped to 48.76 years (Mosher, 2014). The average number of years of service with federal government agencies, including Agency X, climbed steadily each year from 30.7 years in 2008 (Russell, 2010) to 33.1 years in May 2014 (Mosher, 2014), with the overall average years of service between 2008 and 2014 at 31.8 years (Mosher, 2014). Interestingly, 75% of Agency X personnel had less than 6 years of experience with the agency, and the greatest numbers of the 75% were less than 40 years old, whereas those 50 to 59 years of age had 25 to 40 years of experience within the agency (Mosher, 2014), hence the changing demographic landscape (see Appendix C).

The retirement rate for Agency X is gradually increasing (Mosher, 2014). The attrition rate of agency employees (Mosher, 2014) is mainly due to the retirement of older workers (Zubof, 2012), which is beginning to create employment gaps in experienced leadership (Locke, 2010a). Locke (2010a) shared that as much as 62% of the workforce was eligible for retirement by 2015. In 2011, an analysis of the agency's workforce indicated that 73% of employees surveyed specified their availability to retire within the

next 14 years, with 25% of them identifying their ability to retire by 2013 (Casey et al., 2011). Although many employees may be eligible, some are choosing to delay retirement (Locke, 2010b). According to the current and generally accepted average retirement age of 64 years (Munnell, 2011), the average age of 55 years of SES within Agency X (Cherry, 2014) indicates many are approaching eligibility for retirement (see Appendix C).

Considering that the minimum retirement age for federal employees is 57 years (OPM, 2014c) and the average age of SES across the overall federal government is 54 years, with 478 of those in the DoD (OPM, 2013), the potential for issues to occur regarding ascendancy into executive levels becomes more understandable. From fiscal year 2008 to 2014, the average retirement age for Agency X was 61.5 years old (Mosher, 2014). That average retirement age has climbed steadily since 2010. From fiscal year 2008 to 2009, the retirement age climbed from 60.5 to 61.3, dipped to 60.5 in 2010, and rose to 62.4 in 2014 (Mosher, 2014). As of 2014, 38.17% of agency employees were eligible for retirement, with 20.07% available for early retirement and 18.10% available for optional retirement (Mosher, 2014).

In 2008, there was a retirement rate of 634 employees who retired that year. From 2009 to May 2014, the number of agency employee retirements peaked in 2011 at 612 employees (Mosher, 2014). However, since 2011, the actual number of employee retirements has slowed. These data indicate that the great recession initially decreased the agency's retirement rate and that the increasing number of retirement eligible agency employees does not match the slowly decreasing number of actual retirements (see Appendix C). It is estimated that the agency loses approximately 1,000 people every year through attrition (Fanney, 2014). The number of losses (i.e., total number of employees

leaving the agency), mirrors that of the rate of retirement from fiscal year 2009 to fiscal year 2014 (Mosher, 2014), indicating the main driver for losses is due to retirements. Other factors affecting the number of losses may include termination, resignation, death, and removal (Mosher, 2014).

Since 1990, employee staffing has decreased by 50%, but the workload has increased by 25% for current employees (Locke, 2010a). In 2002, the agency began a competency assessment to identify the leadership and technical competencies needed to lead in a DoD organization (Crawford, 2005). The assessment helped to identify if gaps existed and areas in which these gaps were located within the agency. The gaps highlighted issues that age and retirement were beginning to create in the workforce. Some of the gaps identified were in competencies such as change management, creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship, and adequate employee development (Crawford, 2005).

Since the assessment, the agency initiated efforts to progress toward “aggressive recruiting and knowledge management activities [in order to] help mitigate the risk [of employment gaps in the agency]” (DCMA, 2009, p. 6) by implementing a 3,000-employee hiring campaign to combat the pending gaps (Locke, 2010a). Due to recent hiring initiatives, despite attrition, the agency had a recent total population of nearly 11,499 (Mosher, 2014). This new wave of workers has only 0 to 15 years of experience with the agency (Mosher, 2014), and, within a recent 3-year period, the agency grew by approximately 3,000 individuals, but that number has since leveled out (Fanney, 2014). Therefore, this wave of younger, less experienced employees, could present future training and advancement challenges for the agency.

Description of agency leaders. A comparison of the biographies of many of the SES employees throughout the recent history (i.e., since 2000) of Agency X reveals at

least four promotable credentials that enable employees to qualify for executive positions (DCMA, 2014b). The four most common credentials were executive training, outside experience, formal education, and mobility. Having at least these credentials is essential to qualifying for access into federal executive positions. Of the four, three of them may be more likely to be accomplished through a routine career, namely that of outside experience, formal education, and being mobile (DCMA, 2014b). Gaining access to executive training seems to be the most difficult to attain (DCMA, 2014b; Palguta, 2010). Many employees may not even be aware of its existence or where to get the training (Partnership for Public Service, 2002) and may not know what genre of executive training is required for their field (DCMA, 2014c, 2014d; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004).

The review of Agency X's SES professional biographical descriptions indicates that being accepted into a Harvard Senior Executive Fellows program, through Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government (DCMA, 2014b; Koonce, 2010), is a promotable qualification. Not only does participation in the program look good on a resume, but it also indicates that participants of the program have likely gained distinctive perspectives on public policy and managerial practices. Moreover, participating in one of the Federal Executive Institute's executive management or leadership programs is also a bright move for an aspiring executive (DCMA, 2014b; Koonce, 2010; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

The training with the Federal Executive Institute is aimed at leaders with aspirations for running federal agencies, protecting the nation's citizens, and gaining public trust, regardless of the presidential administration in power. Other influential institutions for executive training are the Air Command and Staff College, National War

College, and the Executive Program Manager course (DCMA, 2014a). Additionally, Air Command and Staff College is available only to members of the armed forces and is another excellent source of training for when they become civilians (DCMA, 2014a).

Gaining professional experience outside of Agency X, prior to joining the agency, seems also to be very helpful to an employee's ability to promote. Some of this experience includes having prior service with the military (Colarusso et al., 2010; DCMA, 2014b; Stier, 2007). Although making the move from private industry to government service is not necessarily easy (Tetzner, 2015), having previous experience outside the federal government, in private industry, is also beneficial toward qualifying for positions at the SES level within Agency X (DCMA, 2014b; Partnership for Public Service, 2005; Stier, 2007).

It almost seems a contradiction to consider that internal qualification and occupational ascent would require external experience, because conventionally, an outsider is not necessarily considered one who understands the successful inner workings of an organization if he or she has not been a part of it (Agrawal, Knoeber, & Tsoulouhas, 2000; Bower, 2007; Couper, 2011). Another common option for outside experience comes from being a member of another agency. Agency X was once part of the Defense Logistics Agency (McDonnell, 2000). Since becoming independent, large numbers of Agency X's SES have had previous experience (DCMA, 2014b). Having some previous experience, internal to Agency X, is also beneficial but does not appear to be necessary (DCMA, 2014b).

Receiving on-the-job experience is good (Bink & Cage, 2012; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004), but receiving higher levels of formal education is better for accessing promotional opportunities to executive levels (Bogusz, 2009;

Lewis & Oh, 2008). Many SES members within the agency have a master's degree (Bogusz, 2009), and most of those with a master's degree have at least two of the advanced degrees (DCMA, 2014b). This is consistent with research that suggests leaders with higher performance levels are often those who have attained higher educational levels such as a master's degree or a doctorate (Lewis & Oh, 2008). To a lesser degree of qualifying impact, each employee in Agency X is required to become certified at Level 2 under the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (Snider, 1996) in their prescribed career field within a certain period of employment with the agency (Fast, 2009). Many of the current SES members are certified at Level 3, and some of them are certified at Level 3 in multiple career fields (DCMA, 2014b). Therefore, Level 2 is required, but a higher level of certification is considered necessary for advancement.

Another common credential for gaining access to promotable executive training is to be mobile or available to relocate (DCMA, 2014b). Being mobile can mean more employment and training options are available (Carey, 2012; Stier, 2011). Mobility includes the idea that, in some cases, a lateral move from one position to another may open up more possibilities for an eventual promotion to potential executive access (Jin, 2013; Smith et al., 2012). In other words, an employee may need to move horizontally (i.e., a different position at the same level) in order to move vertically or advance in the organization. It is desirable that SES candidates be highly mobile. The intent is for "mobility [to] offer an expanded set of learning opportunities" (Carey, 2012, p. 9) in varying agencies and positions.

A possible downside to mobility is the difficulty of relocation, especially when families have become more settled in a given geographic region. Relocation is an issue for companies to consider when hiring the right employee (Smith et al., 2012). In the case

of Agency X, SES personnel must relocate to headquarters in Virginia (Miles, 2011), which, for some, may not be a convenient arrangement. Additionally, Carey (2012) reported that critics feel the original vision of mobility is no longer practical with the current structure and issues affecting the SES of the 21st century.

Knowing about, and having, the credentials of executive training, outside experience, formal education, and mobility can make senior executive positions more accessible. However, without an awareness of these necessities for advancement, the path to advancement in the organization is more likely to be fraught with barriers. Therefore, to get around, over, or through these roadblocks, caused by a lack of informational awareness regarding the necessary credentials for advancement, seems purely to be the result of an individual's personal initiative and drive (Covey, 2013). However, there may be ways for agency leaders to reduce and potentially remove the barriers that limit access (Partnership for Public Service, 2002).

Description of existing leadership training. With much of the workforce of Agency X becoming eligible for retirement, attrition rates are a factor in leadership progression and the prospects for leadership development (Locke, 2010a). The leadership-development system within the agency appears to not sufficiently identify, enable, or sustain employee developmental progress into executive leadership roles, enabling the current attrition rate to create employment gaps in leadership faster than the gaps can be filled. As a result, the agency's current system of leadership training does not seem to be effective in its approach to preparing new leaders.

The agency has developed leadership training at the various GS levels. For example, the agency put together leadership maps for employees aspiring to ascend through the GS-7 to GS-9 levels, GS-11 to GS-12 levels, GS-11 to GS-14 levels, GS-12

to GS-14 levels, and GS-14 to GS-15 levels (King, 2013, Pitts, 2007). Each map provides important competency and academic attainments, as well as required individual and agency development courses (DCMA, 2014c). However, the agency does not provide development information beyond the GS-15 level. The OPM website has ample information about the SES and the core curriculum for becoming a member of the elite group (OPM, 2014d). Yet, there is a void when attempting to gain additional information about OPM's requirements for becoming an SES through Agency X (Koonce, 2010).

In 2009, Agency X conducted a human-capital strategic initiative. During the data-gathering phase, staff members performed a strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats analysis of workforce growth and access to training. Results of the analysis indicated opportunities for improvement. Regarding training, the analysis brought to light “the unavailability of some training and the lack of visible links between training and career paths” (DCMA, 2009, p. 7). The agency stated the following:

By providing specific career guidance to employees, the employees will gain an understanding of [the agency's] expectations to progress through their careers. With defined career paths, employees know the training they are expected to register for and complete to progress in their careers. (DCMA, 2009, p. 8)

The agency has worked to relate leadership development with the agency's strategic human capital plan and “focus on developing leadership skills at all levels within the agency” (DCMA, 2009, p. 8). Further, the plan stated the following:

This element also focuses on improving the development processes for the strategic competencies required to achieve the mission. “Action Learning” interventions, such as job shadowing, knowledge sharing, “in the moment” training on a new tool, process or policy, coaching, or mentoring will all be utilized. (DCMA, 2009, p. 8)

For some time, the agency has endeavored to implement various training programs and promote the need for strong leadership. In 2000, at the beginning of the

agency's current history, the agency considered workforce development of utmost importance (McDonnell, 2000). The agency's original intent was to provide training opportunities at the entry, middle, and senior levels. One of the original programs for career development was the Acquisition Career Education Program, which was "a DoD-wide curriculum of courses designed for DoD contracting and acquisition professionals in the Armed Services and defense agencies." (McDonnell, 2000, para.7). Additional important aspects of the initial development path were the OPM's executive development courses (McDonnell, 2000).

The entry-level (i.e., Keystone) program was included and remains a 3-year training program that takes employees through functional training at the GS-7 through GS-11 levels (McDonnell, 2000). The agency had goals for developing a lasting mid-level development program that would carry employees through the GS-11, GS-12, and GS-13 levels of development with training intended to utilize rotational assignment opportunities (McDonnell, 2000). Employees at the GS-14 and GS-15 levels were encouraged to apply for, and participate in, executive development courses such as the Federal Executive Institute, the Harvard Senior Executive Fellows, the Defense Leadership and Management Program, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (DCMA, 2003), which has since been renamed the Eisenhower School (McDonnell, 2000).

In 2001, OPM gave agencies authority to institute their own type of candidate-development program. In 2002, Agency X developed their own program and called it the centralized development program with the intent to provide an array of senior and executive development opportunities, though not necessarily meant as a single track to the SES. Instead, agency leaders began stressing the recent implementation of the

program as the path to organizational excellence (DCMA, 2002). The purposes for the program mainly stemmed from concerns regarding the approaching retirement bubble (DCMA, 2002) and, according to the first director of the agency, “to ensure the continuation of organizational excellence by encouraging mid and senior level employees to broaden their base of leadership and cross-functional skills” (DCMA, 2002, p. 1). In this program, supervisors are encouraged to nominate their finest and most intelligent employees (DCMA, 2002).

Although some sources say opportunities with the centralized development program begin at the GS-11 level (DCMA, 2002), others suggest they commence at the GS-5 through GS-9 levels (Woods, 2007). Many of the training opportunities through the centralized development program are available through Harvard University, National Defense University, Military War Colleges, Federal Executive Institute, Center for Creative Leadership, Council for Excellence in Government, and Office of Personnel Management (DCMA, 2002). Historically, the selection rate has been at 75% (DCMA, 2002), and many of the programs are either degree dependent, GS level or grade dependent, career-field specific, or require a certain amount of prior management experience (DCMA, 2003).

Candidates are measured by their past involvement with self-development initiatives, their plans for the future, their technical aptitude, and a supervisory endorsement (DCMA, 2002). Christensen and McCall (2006) stated, “The hiring executive should describe the problems candidates need already to have confronted in earlier assignments, in order to have developed the instinct for how to do it...which essentially constitutes the hiring specifications” (p. 4). For fiscal years 2013 and 2014, the number of selectees for the centralized development program was 21 and 29,

respectively (Marshall, 2014), as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of Selectees for Centralized Development Program

Item	2013	2014	Total
09	1	0	1
10	0	0	0
11	0	4	4
12	2	5	7
13	5	5	10
14	4	7	11
15	9	8	17
Total	21	29	50

Another working-level certification program includes certification under the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act for members of the Acquisition Corps (Williams, 2009). The Act was signed into law in November 1990 and requires the Secretary of Defense, acting through the Under Secretary of Defense, to establish education and training standards, requirements, and courses for the civilian and military acquisition workforce (Williams, 2009). There are normally three levels of certification, with cross-training occurring through online, classroom, and field work (Williams, 2009) with formal classroom training being combined with on-the-job experience. Employees are afforded time during the workday to complete computer-based training and attend scheduled training events (Williams, 2009).

The agency is not in the field of developing training; therefore, in 2012, the agency set up the College of Contract Management in partnership with the Defense Acquisition University. The intent was to combine the various training opportunities and information within each functional area into a single source and improve the

effectiveness of the knowledge, skills, and abilities of each functional area. The program appears to be beneficial for those at the working level who plan to maintain their competency and certification levels but is not directly intended to contribute to employee advancement into higher levels of responsibility.

Organizations develop road maps to generate focus for various internal goals and vision, so why not develop a type of management-skills road map (Christensen & McCall, 2006)? Strategies can present a type of road map of inherent development pathways (Christensen & McCall, 2006). Separate from the agency's lower level leadership-training maps mentioned previously, Agency X has tried to implement position-based training that utilizes learning maps (DCMA, 2013b). The DCMA (2013b) reported the following:

These maps represent a planned set of learning events that are grouped together logically to deliver knowledge and skills that support work/ skill requirements. The process enables more precise assignment and prioritization of training for groups of comparable employee positions. The [training]... will result in having a consistent process to identify job knowledge gaps for agency personnel, prioritizing needs to fill knowledge gaps, and development of a consistent process for maintaining position-based job knowledge requirements. Position-based training will also enable analysis of future training needs and costs in consideration of emerging employment trends involving both growth and attrition. (p. 22)

The agency has also tried to find ways of training first-line supervisors and middle management, as well as implement advanced leadership programs to accomplish the following:

Identify and prepare the Agency's next generation of senior leaders using OPM and DoD's framework of core competencies for effective leadership. Program participants receive detailed learning guides commensurate with their level of responsibility, while career mapping resources help guide leadership career growth. The core competencies include leading change and people, becoming results-driven, strengthening business acumen and understanding strategic priorities. (DCMA, 2013b, p. 22)

The Research Setting

The setting for the study was a DoD agency with headquarters in Virginia and geographic offices in more than 47 locations worldwide. In 2014, there were about 1,394 employees less than or equal to the GS-9 level, 3,469 employees at the GS-11 level, 3,729 employees at the GS-12 level, and 2,875 at the GS-13 level. The mission of the agency is to be the independent eyes and ears of DoD and its partners by delivering actionable acquisition insight from the factory floor to the global front line. Essentially the study is separated into two groups, SES and GS, and the researcher was interested to discover the separation and unification of viewpoints between the two groups. The researcher had access to data from both groups and continued to have access to both groups throughout the interviewing process.

Participants and Sampling

Extending the research beyond the GS-14, GS-15, and SES levels provided greater insight from a broader perspective of the thoughts and needs of employees and the need for policy change from higher levels of agency leadership. The target population consisted of entry, middle, senior, and executive-level individuals from various functional backgrounds. A purposeful sample of 39 participants covering most GS levels within the organization, as well as the SES level, was originally intended for selection and participation in the interviewing process. The purpose for this type of sampling was to be able to gain maximum variation of participants within the research setting. Creswell (2013) stated the following:

The goal of purposive sampling is not to randomly select units from a population to create a generalized sample. The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable the researcher to answer the research questions. (p. 111)

The researcher selected “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). The participants varied by their functional experience with some having backgrounds in software, systems engineering, quality assurance, contract administration, supply chain, or program management. Additionally, the participants selected for the interviews came from various geographic locations, or CMOs, in the contiguous United States region of the agency. However, most of the participants came from the headquarters’ offices.

The sample of 39 was large enough to accommodate the potential for some selected participants to refuse to participate in the study and still have enough to effectively complete the study. Additionally, purposeful sampling accommodated the ability to include additional respondents at the required levels for when an original respondent did not agree to be included in the study. Two weeks prior to the interview, each potential participant received an introductory cover letter via email explaining the background and purpose for the research as well as the time, date, and location of the interview. It included the individual’s rights to voluntary participation and the confidentiality of personal information. Each participant was made aware that they were selected to represent the agency and that the study had the backing of the agency’s executive leadership.

Procedures

The study consisted of one-on-one interviews in an explanatory research design (Creswell, 2008; Fink, 2003; Finkenberg, 2009) that utilized qualitative data to provide a clearer picture of the causality and explanations of the phenomena (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013). In addition to the data gathered from the initial research, the

explanatory-design approach allowed for data triangulation, in which open-ended interview questions helped to corroborate the findings of the preliminary information. Open-ended questions, at each level of the organizational structure, helped to determine a greater understanding of employees' descriptions, perspectives, and approaches toward leadership development and progression within the agency.

Information was collected about federal employees' "current attitudes, opinions, and beliefs" (Creswell, 2008, p. 389) toward leadership development and advancement within the agency. The intent was to provide evidence that answered the research questions (Creswell, 2008) and offer insight into the potential associations between employees qualifying for advancement into executive leadership roles and the possible refusal to progress into those positions. Following the collection and analysis of data, a theoretical model began to emerge.

The researcher's role in the study and potential biases. The researcher's affiliation and tenure with the agency were stated previously. Some interview questions may be subjective, therefore introducing a form of bias. The participants were not randomly selected, but purposefully selected, which also potentially introduced bias (Creswell, 2008). There is some semblance of subjectivity in this study as the researcher is a member of the agency being researched. However, this relationship afforded the opportunity to more readily gain the necessary access to people, places, data, and other forms of information. Being a researcher within the agency qualified him to ask participants questions that were particular to the themes emerging from the study. Yet, as an employee of the agency, the researcher also remained mindful of the unique position that he was in as the researcher.

Data collection. The study included "multiple and different sources, methods, to

provide corroborating evidence to shed light on themes and perspectives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). This type of triangulation brought an increased clarity toward understanding the phenomenon. Building on the data collected from the initial research, semistructured yet indepth interviews (Charmaz, 2006) were conducted and used as the principal source of data. Access to the agency population was granted, by permission, from agency headquarters. Correspondence with the agency point of contact helped with determining the selection and availability of the participants. The agency point of contact then provided access to the names and email addresses of the employees. The respondents’ identities remain anonymous to all personnel inside and outside the agency, except for the researcher and the headquarter’s point of contact. The point of contact did not have the ability to coerce participants.

Interviews. Interviews were used as part of an interpretivist approach toward participants’ perceptions with the intent that individual interpretations would help to fine tune the theoretical themes through personal dialogue. The interview questions mainly concentrated on the central themes and concepts that emerged from the initial research. As part of the interviewing process, field notes were kept in a notebook and used for writing informal “ideas, reflections, hunches, and notes about patterns that seemed to be emerging” (Glesne, 2006, p. 55) toward a potential theory. Additionally, prior to coding but after the field notes were jotted down, a contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to add analytic notes (Glesne, 2006), or memos, in order to connect and understand the emerging patterns and themes for later usage as categories for coding.

The site for the majority of the one-on-one interviews, especially the SES, was Agency X headquarters at Fort Lee, Virginia, with the option for phone interviews to participants from lower leadership levels located at other CMOs. For the interviews, a

purposeful selection was used as a result of the inferential perspectives of the research. Current agency executives were purposefully selected to be interviewed on a case-by-case basis. The agency point of contact contacted the senior executive leaders at headquarters and informed them of the study and its purpose (Creswell, 2013).

Upon determining the willingness and availability of participants to voluntarily participate in the study, the intent was to select four senior executives to be interviewed at agency headquarters in Virginia. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Written transcripts from the interviews were available to be shared with each participant, providing him or her with the opportunity to offer clarification and additional insight (Compton, 2008). By conducting interviews, new insights and information emerged, opening greater views that helped to answer the research questions, constructs, and overall phenomena being investigated.

Data analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to “organize the data, provide an early identification of missing data, and indicate potentially critical themes or areas to pursue” (Caruthers, 2011, p. 63). The analysis presented material that addressed the research questions and the process required detailed methods of probing for significant data from various sources to provide a more robust picture of the situation (Garman & Piantanida, 2009; Suter, 2012). A challenging part of the analysis occurred when converting the outcome of the data into categories, themes, models, processes, and coherent connections, with the intent of providing insightful conclusions (Suter, 2012; Thomas, 2003). To do this effectively, Creswell (2013) suggested a three-step approach of logically “reducing the data into meaningful segments, combining the codes into broader categories, and making comparisons in the data” (p. 180).

The qualitative data and notes from each interview were uploaded into software

designed for analyzing qualitative data. Qualitative analysis may not depend as heavily on the usage of software as quantitative statistical analysis, but the software helped to “sort information into meaningful patterns” (Suter, 2012, p. 362) and “facilitate coding, organization, and rapid retrieval of information” (Suter, 2012, p. 382). The qualitative software programs used were Dedoose and Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). The LIWC allowed for the analysis of words used in the qualitative text. Doing so enabled the researcher to better understand the degree of positive or negative emotion and cognition behind the words typed into the qualitative responses. These software programs enhanced the “annotating, sorting, classifying, and generating of descriptions of information” (Suter, 2012, p. 382).

The function of coding is a key aspect in analyzing the data (Caruthers, 2011). The process involves progressively collecting data and information, then continually sorting and defining it until it meets the objective of the research (Glesne, 2006). Various categories were used for coding information to identify patterns. These patterns were sorted into overarching themes throughout the data analysis process, which facilitated meaningful interpretations of the data and provided the crux of the participants' responses (Caruthers, 2011; Suter, 2012; Thomas, 2003). Additionally, memos of the data and codes were employed to allow a logical theory to emerge from multiple concepts (Creswell, 2013; Garman & Piantanida, 2009; Glesne, 2006).

Open coding. Findings were provided from the process of systematic design. The first step in the process involved open coding. The initial resources for this phase included intuitive knowledge (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015) from interpretations of data retrieved from agency archives, informal topical conversations with random agency employees, as well as notated (i.e., memoing) observations of information retrieved from

a review of the literature and later, participant interviews. The empirical knowledge determined from these preliminary findings were contrasted, correlated (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015), and placed into categories as the theory's constructs. The headings of these broad categories assisted in conveying the narrative of opportunities for high-level advancement within Agency X and potential conditions necessary for qualification.

Axial coding. Following the initial coding phase, axial coding was used to investigate further by relating the information from the multiple constructs to determine a central category. It was in this phase that the influences of causal mechanisms became apparent, in which variations in the original hypothesis appeared (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), the core processes influencing the phenomena began to take shape, and potential strategies and their consequences, as a result of the causality, were identified.

Selective coding. During the final phase of coding, a selective process was followed that used categorical information from axial coding to examine even further into the core of the phenomenon. Selective coding was used to “focus on actualizing the core category in a highly abstract conceptual manner. This [was] achieved through full theoretical saturation of both the core category and its subsidiary categories, subcategories, and their properties” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 12). In this phase, systemic knowledge (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015) was understood, the theory was refined (Creswell, 2008), which enabled if-then statements to be made (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015), and the theory was written in a sort of narrative form.

The computer used to store the research information (e.g., survey response data, interview transcripts) was password protected, with accessibility only available through the researcher's federal common access Card, or smartcard, solely for that computer. Additionally, the computer was located in an enclosed office space that required a

personal key to access the locked door to the office space.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established through the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Sikolia, Biros, Mason, & Weiser, 2013). The credibility determined internal validity through triangulation of the data. The process of using various data sources to triangulate, corroborate, or authenticate the evidence would validate the findings. Grounded theory lends itself to being a research method with strong potential for validity. After all, it was the developers of grounded theory who stated that the process of grounded-theory research goes hand in hand with verifying the research theory being studied (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The very purpose of ensuring the validity of the study ultimately ensures that the eventual theory developed is more than just a nice story (Urquhart, 2012).

Part of this triangulation came from the results of the 2009 survey conducted by the Senior Executives Association, which undertook to develop a valid research instrument for determining the extent of the risk to the federal government if the best and the brightest executive-type employees remain outside the vacant executive positions. Additional aspects of authentication came from data retrieved from archived records within the agency, information retrieved from a review of the literature, memos of observations, and the participant interviews. After the interviews were conducted and audio taped with an electronic recorder, a verbatim record of the dialogue was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. Each participant could review the transcription, confirm its accuracy, and recommend any corrections or clarifying comments.

Transferability refers to the consistency of the process and results of the study as they relate from one file of research to another (Shenton, 2004). For example, the process

for how to conduct the research, as well as how consistently the constructs and causality can transfer into the ascendancy of leadership within a schoolboard setting or even an ecclesiastical setting, will connote good transferability. Transferability can be considered the external validity of the study. Therefore, a clear description of the methodology and the results was provided throughout the research process. Additionally, a clear understanding of the researcher's relationship with the agency and the participants was assistive. The reliability or dependability of this study can be better determined upon the increased usage and application of the procedures of this study in other fields. Subsequent to the conclusion of this research, the confirmability of the study can be determined by having another researcher follow the prescribed procedures and determine the objectivity of the original study.

Limitations

Reliability of the study can be improved as additional researchers apply the study to various organizational settings and then compare the results with the findings of this research. Additionally, this is the first and only federal agency within the DoD to participate in this study, whereas the problem could be replete throughout many federal agencies and organizations.

Chapter 4: Results

Accessing Senior-Level Positions: Setting the Stage for Determining Constructs

As explained in earlier chapters, research on employee advancement into higher level positions has primarily focused on the characteristics of successful leadership development. The existing literature indicates that present federal employment necessitates more advanced skills at higher grade levels than federal jobs in years past and that there are a number of potential barriers along the way that may cause an employee to look at other alternatives for progressing toward higher level positions. In this study, Participant 62Q572 stated the following:

I think people want to advance into senior leadership roles because they have enthusiasm for who we are and what we stand for and they can see where things can be fixed. I don't think I've been in a situation where everybody's like, "the government's just broke." I think those who would be attracted to moving up are those who actually have a very clear vision of what we can do about being broken.

However, our knowledge of why gaps in executive positions may be occurring is still underdeveloped. Moreover, a large amount of research on employee advancement into higher level positions indicates the notion of success and satisfaction is primarily to be found at those higher levels.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of ascendancy, it remains feasible that employees may find fulfillment in their ability to contribute positively, regardless of the grade level. Given that most agency employees likely do want to participate in some form of development that will enhance their professional expertise, rather than focusing solely on higher grade level perspectives, the researcher concentrated on revealing and describing the constructs that affect all grade levels. With the likelihood that advancement opportunities are intended for all employees, the researcher was able to

search a wide range of unique perspectives and focus on a degree of employee sentiment within the context of professional development.

A description of the findings offers emphasis on the satisfaction employees express in reference to qualifying opportunities for growth. The range of satisfaction spans employee contentment with growth prospects they believe are available, versus those not content, with each side indicating the subsequent effect of whether to remain with the agency. In directing consideration to the qualifying opportunities, the researcher discusses facets of perceived and potential pathways for progression, comparing attractors with detractors, and the practicality of the end reward. The researcher also suggests some of the attractors or detractors that may lead to position refusal. In focusing on position qualification, the researcher highlights the prominent elements that either improve or decrease the flow of information throughout the agency and how that, too, might lead to position refusal.

Furthermore, the researcher offers information in relation to senior and executive leaders and the situations in which they may find themselves with regard to the general flow of information. Together, position qualification and position refusal intersect to provide employee perspectives that can be broadly used to answer the following question: Why are gaps in executive-level positions not being filled as expected? This chapter also broadly addresses the following subquestions:

1. To what extent do employees' perceptions of opportunities for advancement into executive-level positions align with current program policy?
2. What effect do an agency's capabilities have on the concepts of position qualification and position refusal?

Transitioning into this portion of the research, the phenomenon of interest became

clearer, suggesting that senior and executive vacancies are occurring because something else is replacing qualified individuals' aspirations to fill the vacancies. Being able to determine the distinct variable or variables being used as a replacement for unfilled positions could help expand our understanding of whether vacancies are in fact being refused. In an effort to obtain and understand useful data, the researcher used various means of data reduction, such as 19 interview transcripts, memos, and field journal notes. Participant employment levels ranged from GS-6 to SES and included a variety of functional backgrounds and responsibilities. Other tools used for analyzing data were Dedoose, LIWC, and Google Books Ngram Viewer.

Unlike the formal experience of interviewing and recording participants, the researcher also observed the process of leadership development and advancement within the agency by attending agency-required meetings on an 8-week developmental assignment at headquarters. In this setting, the researcher was able to keep a field journal of his observations and informal discussions. The memos and journal notes provided an opportunity to record personal thoughts as well as potential constructs and codes (Glesne, 2006). Incorporating this information with the interviews presented many sources from which to triangulate data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). When referring to data retrieved from personal experience at headquarters, instead of using responder codes such as those used for recording interviews, if reference to an individual's comment is necessary, they are referred to by a generic title, such as training coordinator employee or training coordinator manager because there are many employees and many managers.

Initial Analysis

Dedoose. After the interviews were recorded and transcribed, they were uploaded into Dedoose (Lieber, Weisner, & Taylor, 2013), a cloud-based data-analysis program.

The researcher used the program as a tool for coding the qualitative transcripts to determine key words or phrases that might offer insight into potential constructs that could lead to the causality of the phenomenon. This was done by following the phases of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding as described in Chapter 3. Additionally, numerous memos and field notes were utilized in conjunction with the codes.

There were a total of 21 first-tier coding categories. Some of these categories had subcategories down to the second, third, fourth, and even fifth tiers. However, when the coded data were analyzed, the subcategories were rolled up into the main first-tier code category as needed. Approximately 1,300 excerpts were identified with over 2,700 code applications. The four most commonly coded first-tier themes to emerge were qualification, awareness, barrier, and culmination, respectively. For much of the analysis, emphasis was placed on comparing the coded data with GS levels. However, the researcher was also able to make determinations, if needed, based on age, gender, and education level. Table 2 illustrates the themes below.

The researcher found that respondents reporting at the GS-15 level offered insight within the context of qualification 135 times, or at a frequency of 21.2%, with GS-13s at 105.3 times at a frequency of 16.6%, and GS-11s at 105.0 (16.5%). Furthermore, respondents reporting at the GS-11 level discussed aspects of their overall awareness or lack thereof for advancement opportunities 117 times (17.5%), and those at the GS-13 level discussed it 125.3 times (18.8%). It is in the GS-11 through 13 levels that employees are in a critical position to discover what is needed to breach the next level of barriers and continue progression into the senior levels of GS-14 and GS-15 and eventually SES. When discussing barriers to advancement, those at the GS-15 level made mention of it 102 times (15.6%) with those at the GS-11 level having a frequency of 106

times (16.2%). Data are also available for the theme of culmination in the table.

Table 2

First-Tier Themes

Level	Total count	%
Qualification		
11	105.0	16.50
13	105.3	16.60
15	135.0	21.20
Awareness		
11	117.0	17.50
13	125.3	18.80
Barrier		
15	102.0	15.60
11	106.0	16.20
Culmination		
6	108.0	17.20
13	108.0	17.20
11	109.0	17.40

The LIWC. The LIWC is a text-analysis program that is used for explaining word usage as an indication of psychological and social perspective (Nadrei, 2014).

Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010) stated the following:

The degree to which people express emotion can tell us how people are experiencing the world; how people react may say a lot about how they cope with the event and the extent to which the event plays a role in the future. (p. 32)

The LIWC program uses averages to determine parallels and variations of word usage among individual categories. Gothberg (2012) stated, “It helps validate the rater/coder findings of a study in an unbiased manner. Except for raw word count and words per sentence, all variables reflect the percentage of total words” (p. 1). Additionally, Tausczik

and Pennebaker stated, “Pronouns and verb tense are useful linguistic elements that can help identify focus, which, in turn, can show priorities, intentions, and processing” (p. 31). Therefore, in an effort to determine the participants’ priorities, satisfaction, and so forth, the researcher analyzed their pronoun and verb tense usage using LIWC.

To help understand the affect that family, sociality, work, and achievement might have on a participant’s perspective with regard to the importance of being mobile, the researcher used LIWC to help analyze the word count from each participant’s transcript. These words are usually important topics of discussion when considering personal professional development and advancement opportunities or lack of, particularly when determining whether to geographically relocate (i.e., be more mobile) to attain a position.

When analyzing the word-count data from participants with regard to social processes, it became clear that facets of sociality play a large part in the lives of Agency X employees. For example, compared with LIWC’s average dictionary word count at 8.63%, nearly 14 of the research participants had high levels of social-word usage, with Participant 85U352 having the highest percentage of total words at 13.75%. However, when *family* was mentioned among the participants, only one participant exceeded the LIWC average word count of 0.53%, with 0.54%. The usage of the word *family* indicates a very important point of consideration when making advancement decisions. Similar results occurred for references to the word *home*. Although *money* seemed important, overall participant usage of the word did not exceed that of the LIWC dictionary average. However, participants referenced the categories of *work* and *achievement* much more frequently, with every participant far exceeding the LIWC average. This is probably, not surprisingly, somewhat due to the subject and setting of the research.

Considering the results of the data and how some LIWC-based categories can

offer insight into individuals' perspectives toward qualifying for or refusing senior and executive-level positions, the researcher looked at participants' pronoun and tense usage. The results provide insight into participants' overall decision-making processes. For example, when people speak in the future tense, their conversation is often more positive. The opposite is often true when speaking in the past tense (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). The total number of pronouns includes both personal and impersonal pronouns. The LIWC dictionary average for total pronouns is 12.14%. Only two of the 19 federal workers participating in the questionnaire were below the average. This indicates that most participants are more inclined to social interactions, which can be an important component for leadership and continued advancement.

Participants who used *I* most frequently (i.e., between 6.5% and 7.2%) included GS-11s, GS-12s, and one GS-14, which may be an indication of the individuals' motivations to succeed. However, it also alludes to more of an internal focus on self rather than an external organizational focus. An outlier among pronoun usage came again from Participant 85U352, whose usage of words such as *he*, *she*, or *they* was significantly greater than the remainder of participants, indicating a potentially accusatory tone toward others for the participant's lack of ascendancy. Participant 85U352 is a 50-year-old GS-6 with minimal college experience.

Those more inclined to use words of insight and causation are those who are usually more willing to venture into new personal territory. Agency X employees that scored higher percentages in this area were in the GS-9 to GS-12 range. Employees in this range are in a greater position for significant advancement opportunities. Interestingly, those at the GS-15 through SES levels did not score as high, possibly because they have already attained or are closer to attaining the highest levels within the

agency.

When examining participants' word count for the usage of positive-emotion words and negative-emotion words, a positivity ratio can be determined. The ideal ratio is somewhere within 2.9013 and 11.6346. If a person's ratio is within these parameters, they are more inclined to flourish within the context of a given situation, whereas those outside the ratio's parameters indicate a greater tendency to languish. In clustering the data, the researcher found that all but four participants had a positivity ratio that settled within the recommended range, indicating enough positive references within their verbiage on the research topic to have potentially healthy progression possibilities (i.e., flourish). The majority ranged from 4.0 up to 11.16.

Of the participants who met the positivity ratio parameters, only four spoke with a future tense (i.e., positive) that at least met the LIWC average, which may indicate an overall weak positive perspective among the participants. Of the four who were outside the ratio parameters, two also exceeded the LIWC average for past tense (i.e., negative) word usage, indicating a much less favorable perspective on opportunities for development and advancement within the agency. Additionally, two other participants who met within the ratio parameters, albeit on the lower end, also had higher than most past-tense word usage. Of the four who exceeded the LIWC past-tense average, all were at least 50 years of age or older and female. Additionally, the lowest GS level of these four was a GS-6 and the highest level was a GS-14. Interestingly, males at the GS-15 and SES level had the most to say (i.e., highest overall word count) regarding their views on the research subject.

Furthermore, in an attempt to measure how well the observed and expected distribution of data provided from the questionnaire and LIWC fit, the researcher

conducted chi-square tests. Chi-square analysis is an inferential test using a p value connected to a distribution (Huck, 2012). It is used to determine if the expected outcome compared with the actual (i.e., observed) outcome is different, or statistically significant, enough to make an inference of the target population. The results are helpful in narrowing in on areas that could use more focus. For example, the researcher wished to know if job satisfaction among GS levels is statistically different with regard to the influence that family might have on an employee's present job opportunities. Table 3 indicates there is enough evidence to conclude that GS levels are significant with regard to the influence of family on an employee's present job and aspects of advancement opportunities. The same is true for home. Similar results occurred for gender (see Table 4) and college degree (see Table 5) with regard to family and home. Therefore, indications are such that the data provided from the questionnaire and LIWC correspond.

Table 3

Job Satisfaction With Regard to Family and Home

Level	Observed	Family		Home	
		Expected	Chi-square test	Expected	Chi-square test
Not satisfied	1				
Somewhat satisfied	3				
Satisfied	5				
Very satisfied	10	0.12	1.3828E-219	0.09	5.8077E-300

The researcher also wanted to know whether there is enough evidence to conclude that males and females are different in their satisfaction toward their present job. With a p value of 0.68 in Table 6, the results are not statistically significant. There is not enough evidence to say that males and females are statistically different in their satisfaction

toward their present job. There is also not enough evidence to conclude whether having a college degree or not having a college degree is significant with respect to present job satisfaction, as indicated in Table 7 with a p value of 0.33.

Table 4

Gender With Regard to Family and Home

Gender	Observed	Family		Home	
		Expected	Chi-square test	Expected	Chi-square test
Female	11				
Male	8	0.12	0.0000	0.09	0.0000

Table 5

College Degree With Regard to Family and Home

Level	Observed	Family		Home	
		Expected	Chi-square test	Expected	Chi-square test
Some college	2				
Bachelor	8				
Master	9	0.12	1.5348E-244	0.09	0.0000

Table 6

Gender and Job Satisfaction

Item	Male	Female	Total	Chi-square test
Not satisfied	0	1	1	
Somewhat satisfied	2	1	3	
Satisfied	2	3	5	
Very satisfied	4	6	10	
Total	8	11	19	0.682969

Table 7

College Degree and Job Satisfaction

Item	Degree	No degree	Total	Chi-square test
Not satisfied	1	0	1	0.330294
Somewhat satisfied	2	1	3	
Satisfied	4	1	5	
Very satisfied	10	0	10	
Total	17	2	19	

Additionally, there is not statistical significance between gender, having a college degree, or GS level, and the amount of pronouns a participant used or the use of positive emotional words, as shown in Tables 8, 9, and 10. However, there was a stronger link between differences among gender, having a college degree, and GS level with regard to the usage of negative emotional words, indicating a relation in the data provided from the questionnaire and LIWC, as well as potential dissatisfaction with the advancement process.

Table 8

Gender and Positive or Negative Words

Gender	Observed	Positive		Negative	
		Expected	Chi-square test	Expected	Chi-square test
Female	11	3.27	0.1218	0.69	4.62054E-39
Male	8				

Google Ngram. Appendix D shows the simple inquiry into the relationship of words and their usage within literature over the last 200 years, as assessed by Google Books Ngram Viewer (Lin et al., 2012). The words used are those from the research

questions. The information offers a visual description of supplemental data using a corpus of words to determine the significance of key words when paired together in lexicon. More importantly, the figures suggest potential correlations between the key words within the parameters of the research questions. The words also indicate relevancy, when sequenced together, to current workforce culture.

Table 9

College Degree and Positive or Negative Words

Item	Observed	Positive		Negative	
		Expected	Chi-square test	Expected	Chi-square test
Some college	2				
Bachelor	8				
Master	9	3.27	0.4974	0.69	9.53804E-29

Table 10

General-Schedule Level and Positive or Negative Words

Level	Observed	Family		Home	
		Expected	Chi-square test	Expected	Chi-square test
06	1				
09	1				
11	4				
12	3				
13	3				
14	1				
15	4				
Senior executive service	2	3.27	0.99759	0.69	0.0000721

Over the years, the words *progression* and, to a lesser extent, *ascendancy*, have gradually been replacing the word *advancement*. The word *policy* increased significantly, until the 1960s, and has since plateaued. Results suggest there is little indication that

these words are used together in conversation, possibly indicating a deficiency in the amount of policy implemented with the intent of improving workforce personnel's opportunities for advancement. In literature, the frequency of the word *qualification* has been used steadily over the years, whereas *refusal* has gradually declined somewhat since the 1940s. Replacing *refusal* with *refuse* indicates an even more rapid decline in usage.

However, if the word *refuse* or *refusal* is replaced with the synonym *reject*, as in “Would an employee reject opportunities for advancement?,” the word use has rebounded and significantly increased since the 1920s, suggesting a potential association between the words *refusal* and *qualification* within the parameters of the research questions. Additionally, the Oxford Dictionary's 2010 word of the year was *refudiate*, which is a blended word of *refute* or *refuse* with *repudiate*. The word is essentially a verb that means to *reject* (Entis, 2014; Rowse, 2011).

Qualification Considered for Leadership

Agency X employees seemed to have clear personal viewpoints of what they considered as requirements for qualification into senior or executive leadership responsibilities. Whereas some participants described these qualifications as more of a list of attributes, others thought the requirements for qualification needed more of an explanation with a few key attributes suited as essential for leaders to have, and yet others were able to narrow their thoughts down to just one or two. For example, Participant 61U063, a GS-11, shared “experience, education, people person, positive attitude, and hard work.” Participant 81S777, a GS-15 listed “a servant's heart, mission knowledge, ability to lead people, education, and mission experience.”

Overall, the predominant qualifiers were as follows: (a) experience, (b) knowledge or education, and (c) the ability to communicate effectively. Two participants

summed up all three with these statements by suggesting, “I think you have to have a certain level of knowledge in all the different functional areas if you want to talk to the agency” (Participant 88B511), and “I believe senior or executive leaders need experience, intelligence, and the ability to both listen and communicate well” (Participant 71D731). Given the frequent rotation of senior leaders, particularly at the field or CMO levels, Agency X employees have ample opportunities to work with new leaders and watch how they operate. As such, experience was overwhelmingly the most important qualification that a senior or executive leader could have.

For example, Participant 61U063 stated, “Experience.” Participant 75G948 reported, “Part of it is definitely your experience level.” Participant 85E676 stated, “It takes quite a bit of experience; you have to have specific education and experience in order to be proficient at that level.” Participant 88B511 indicated, “You need a vast array of experience. You don’t necessarily need to be the expert in every area, but in some ways you need to be a jack of all trades and master of none.” Participant 87W595 reported, “Broad background doing lots of different types of things, experience at different organizations.” Participant 75D725 stated the following:

You have to understand what the functional level employees are dealing with. The only way you get that is through experience on your own and it helps with your credibility as well too. That’s a key piece to it. Get in, learn the business, and have some flexibility to have some experiences in different levels of the organization, whether it’s with staff, or at headquarters doing some policy, or working at a CMO in the field. Getting experience at different levels of the organization is important.

Interestingly, when asked how they came to discover for themselves what these qualifying traits are, experience was again the predominant response, as demonstrated by responses from Participant 65L878, Participant 75G948, Participant 78G101, Participant 82X092, Participant 88B511, Participant 71D731, and Participant 81S777. Participant

62Q572 offered an insightful perspective on the subject of personal discovery that she received by confronting other leaders regarding their perspectives. What is interesting is that, although education has the potential for being claimed as the leading reason for how leaders become qualified for their higher level positions, it is still experience that remains the most important. She stated the following:

As I talk with people in senior leadership positions, they tend to say similar things that they worked in certain places or got certain experience. You never hear them say it's because of my education or it's because of my doctorate that I have what I have. It's usually a result of doing some time in areas that gave them a broad enough view to sit where they're sitting because they have to cover multiple topics.

Although not as apparent as having the necessary experience to be qualified for leadership positions, education seems to be the second most commonly considered required qualification. Not only was it the second most mentioned in frequency, but many of the participants followed up their comments on experience with education. The researcher found that education is considered a dominant qualifier across all GS levels. Participant 65L878, a GS-12, shared the following about the importance of having adequate education as a leader: "Educational level is looked at as a minimum. A bachelors as a minimum. Certifications within the agency is a factor." Participant 92K021, a GS-11, stated, "There is usually education involved and it's usually specific to whatever that leader is being called upon to oversee." Additionally, Participant 75D725, a GS-15, elaborated a little more into his observations regarding the importance of education as a qualifier for promotional opportunities:

Once you have that, referring to experience, I do think there is an education element. When leaders in this organization are dealing with uniform counterparts, they need to understand that most of them have bachelors and master's degrees. Some already have doctorates. There's a higher level education requirement at least to the masters level with senior leaders in the organization.

In fact, every one of the participants interviewed had at least some college. Many had at least a bachelor's degree. The GS-11s tended to be the largest number of bachelor-degree holders. Interestingly, of the two that have only some college, one of them is a GS-6, yet the other is a GS-13, suggesting other credentials may have played a part in their personal ascendancy. Most of the participants have a master's degree, with many of them holding two master's degrees. All participants having higher than higher than master's degrees or two master's degrees were GS-15 or higher.

Although experience, education, and communication might be important factors, not all agreed. Participant 89D001, for example, a GS-11 expressed the following as a result of observing the current senior leaders:

In my honest opinion, I don't believe there are any required qualifications to become a senior or executive leader. I see supervisors who don't even have college degrees and I see supervisors who have little to no people skills. I see supervisors who have no organizational skills.

More information on effective communication will be provided in a later section. From the perspective that Participant 71D731 previously shared, "senior or executive leaders need to both listen and communicate well; communication is an important qualifier for leadership. However, this ability to communicate becomes apparent in various forms beyond just what a person says."

Participant 79A648 offered, "Most good leaders have a little bit of charisma, a personality that allows them to not only communicate effectively with the workforce but to also take feedback from the workforce, even negative feedback delivered in a rough manner." Therefore, communicating effectively is not just what a person says, but also what a person does with what other people say. Participant 87W595 stated it is their "ability to listen and discern." One senior ranking leader in Agency X went so far with

communication as to seek feedback from constituents to find out areas in which he personally needed to improve. The feedback let him know that, to others, he “just came across as a jerk and that was really good feedback for me that you have to know your stuff, but it’s how you say things, not just what you say. It’s how you carry yourself” (Participant 63J226).

This understanding of what employees within Agency X consider to be some of the more predominant required qualifications to become a senior or executive leader is beneficial for setting the groundwork for the remainder of this chapter. Taken together, the reader will see how each plays a role, in some form or another, within the progression possibilities available to the workforce.

Advancement opportunities. Participant 92K021 stated, “I’m a strong believer in getting more education. My education isn’t ever going to stop, but I also know that doing that will help me in applying for a job.” Education is not only considered to be a necessary qualification for a leader to have, but, as is shared in this section, it is also considered essential for advancement opportunities to occur. Although experience was deemed important, it was not a common theme when discussing advancement or promotional prospects, suggesting that the days are long past when one could be promoted solely on his or her time and experience within the position. Instead, a potential advancee, whether considered a qualified leader or not, must also possess an accredited academic degree, as shared by some participants.

For example, Participant 63J226 shared how he has two master’s degrees and that qualifying for advancement “requires constant education” with the majority of people pursuing a higher education to become “more competitive” and “build their resume.” This same sentiment was affirmed by Participant 88B511, who stated, “If you want to

make yourself a stronger candidate, go off and pursue those higher education possibilities.” As mentioned above, most mid-level to SES-level employees had at least a master’s degree. The lowest level employee with a master’s degree was Participant 85E676, a GS-11, who considered advancement opportunities to be increasingly competitive, with the selection process becoming more difficult, which is why she considers it important to get the education now, in preparation for future employment opportunities, instead of trying to get the job and then getting the degree. Participant 78A644 asserted a similar outlook by stating the following:

I didn’t really even try for a promotion until I had a master’s degree. I didn’t even try. I didn’t even try until I was already working in the new supply chain group and I’d already gone to the School of William and Mary. I think my master’s degree education helped with promotions. Yet some of the people have been promoted to very high positions with no backgrounds or education. They have lots of experience.

Experience is beneficial but may not necessarily be enough for a person to advance and may, therefore, need to be coupled with professional education. Yet, education alone is also not necessarily enough to advance and should, therefore, be coupled with experience, as Participant 79A648 identified: “Too often, we hire GS13-15 that have a great educational background. They’ve done somewhat well at lower levels. They interview very well, but they don’t really understand the mission of the organization and those technical skills that support that.” Education plus experience, together, has the ability to significantly enhance prospective executives’ chances for advancement.

Within Agency X, however, even a combination of these two enablers may not be enough to prevail against the barriers into higher levels, as Participant 92K021 identified:

I was under the impression that if I got my foot in the door I was good to go. That didn’t and doesn’t happen because of old rules and regulations. I get what the purpose may have been decades ago, to make it more fair for people so friends can’t appoint friends. In the long run it’s hurt quite a few people. I want to

become a leader, but even now with all the experience, education, and supervisor history and I'm still not qualified to be a leader in this agency and I think that's ridiculous.

This reference shares the perception that, beyond experience and education, knowing somebody at a higher level could potentially open additional pathways toward advancement. Other participants' perceptions on the topic were not as positive. For example, Participant 78A644, a GS-13, stated, "So there's a good old boys club, obviously, at headquarters. The necessary requirements for the executive level are inadequate."

In describing their perceptions of qualified leaders' opportunities for advancement, a common theme began to emerge. Participants from GS-6 all the way to GS-15 freely shared their belief that a good-old-boy network is having a pronounced effect on workforce promotions, with some suggesting that efforts to improve the current culture of the agency will continue to be stymied as long as a relationship-based system of promotions occurs. Of note is that the comments shared on this topic were not offered from the SES level. Another profound point is that females provided all but one of the comments shared on this topic, particularly those describing the promotion process as an unequal playing field. Participant 92K021, a female GS-11, explained as follows:

How we get there needs to change. In my opinion, the way that the agency does things, sees things, is kind of antiquated. It's "one way, my way, or the highway, and this is how it's going to be done." It still is the good old boy network. There have been circumstances that I've seen where there have been, the people in a higher position helping other people to make it through the USAjobs system.

Similarly, Participant 79A648, a GS-15 employee, emphasized the need for members of the workforce to be permitted to advance based on their merits. He shared that, if the hiring system is used correctly, then it works really well, which allows employees to become more qualified as leaders and allows currently qualified leaders to

advance “for the right reasons.” Additionally, he shared things he has done in an attempt to ensure that the hiring process followed by his CMO is done fairly all the time. Yet, he stressed the difficulty in contending against the present culture:

What I’ve seen in my years in the agency is all too often people are hired for the wrong reason. Somebody knows them. “Oh, they’re a nice person, or I feel sorry for them, or they need this promotion.” Emotional kind of stuff. When I came here, I was asked to move over here to reset the operation here. They had a good old boy network going on. If you were one of the deputy’s boys or girls you got promoted. If you weren’t you didn’t. I had a contracts group where the contracts director had hired people they knew, not people who were qualified to do the job. They met the minimum requirements because you have to meet the minimum to make the referral list.

Participant 79A648 continued by pointing out ways he has tried to make improvements in the advancement system up to his level and offered, “I think the system we have is slow, but it works if you exercise every element of the process and do it correctly.”

Beyond the good-old-boy network, participants acknowledged that utilizing derivatives of a relationship-based system is an effective means of getting beyond the seemingly indomitable barriers prohibiting advancement; that is, to know somebody at the higher levels who can help move the aspirant along to the other side the barrier.

Participant 85U352, a GS-6, shared, “You have to know somebody. Most of our leadership comes from one location, so it’s about who you know. That’s how it seems around here.

Similarly, Participant 62Q572, a GS-12, explained, “I am under the impression it is who you know and people who can vouch for you and your character.” Participant 89D001, a GS-11, also responded, “If they tried to advance and were turned down, I would have to say, they weren’t ‘popular’ or did not have someone within the agency that knew them to put in a good word.” Participant 89T677, another GS-12, expounded further by giving an intriguing viewpoint into the potential reality of a person’s motive

for advancement and how it can affect others:

I feel like it's just political, like there's a lot of 'who you know', which again, could be government wide. I know it happened with the Air Force. With the agency, I see a lot of the rearranging. You have to know the right people and get to that certain level and then the decision you make, as you're going through the job, in the back of your mind, just waiting for the next opportunity to move up. That's fine, but when you're talking about leaders who have to directly or indirectly supervise, it affects everybody below them. When you hire people, it's not a coincidence if you hear someone say, 'Oh I know this person!' and then the next thing you know they are hired. It's happened a lot in the 3 years I've worked for the agency. And I don't like that. I think people get involved because they are intelligent. It becomes a climb versus wanting to do something wholeheartedly.

Like Participant 85U352, the GS-6 who had difficulty with partiality in the hiring process due to the geographic size of the CMO, Participant 78A644, a GS-13, experienced a similar situation. She stated the following:

The promotion process in and of itself is one where a lot of times whoever is selected to be on the selection panel for the interviewing, it kind of depends on who you know and whether or not they like you. And in this geographical area, there are X number of people that are basically in the agency. A lot of people stay in the agency a long time. So I wound up knowing everybody on the interview board, which was good and bad. The problem with it is, a lot of times people pick their favorites. A lot of times headquarters can influence who is selected. That's the big problem with the promotion opportunities in the agency, because I don't think that they're very fair. I've seen it happen.

However, utilizing relationship-based opportunities can be beneficial, particularly through networking. Participant 65L878 identified the importance of getting people together, preferably with different backgrounds, in order to have an effective networking experience. He stated the following:

Bringing different organizations together and seeing the similarities and differences between different agencies and how they lead people and seeing similar struggles and getting some answers that you otherwise may not have heard. I think the interactions between different agencies and networking.

Participant 92K021 described networking as an essential tool for continued development and advancement that becomes more readily available through training

experiences. She stated the following:

Being able to network with other people. A lot of these training opportunities, that's exactly what it is, is meeting other people and learning how they got where they are and what they do and what their education level is. Networking is key.

Other participants shared similarly that a perk of participating in developmental programs could lead to positive networking experiences that, if desired, may eventually lead an individual from a less desirable situation into one that is more personally desirable.

For example, other participants stated that the biggest was probably the interaction with other future leaders and gaining their perspectives (Participant 87W595). Building coalitions and managing expectations, along with networking was expressed by Participant 81S777. Participant 78A644 stated, "The training program was awesome. It was a great networking opportunity and for all of us our world got a little bigger and our thinking got a little bigger through that experience. It was a great opportunity." Even if a good-old-boy network exists, there are opportunities, if done effectively, to use networks as a means for finding opportunities for progression.

Satisfaction of present job and opportunities for a higher level job. In

recounting the current job positions in which participants were qualified to work, many of the participants said they were at least somewhat satisfied, with most of the participants stating they were very satisfied. However, Participant 89D001 stated, "Considering everything, I am currently not satisfied with my job. I just don't like the position or job in general." Although most participants were satisfied with their present job, follow-on responses alluded to participants not being satisfied with future opportunities to get a promotion or to get what they consider to be a better job. For many, it appeared that the outlook for upward movement seemed bleak. The common theme seemed to be that progression was not likely an achievable option. However, it was here that the reasons

why it was unachievable began to diversify.

Some of the reasons why satisfaction waned when considering future opportunities for improvement were due to lack of desire or willingness to move from their current geographic location. Others felt that, because they were at the latter end of their career, they would not be willing to pursue those opportunities. Participant 79A648, a GS-15, stated, “My pay level was already higher than most of the SESs. I’d gotten to the point in my life where the quality of life was worth more to me than the ego boost of being an SES.” There was also the perception that there is not enough turnover at higher levels to open up more opportunities, that there is not enough cross-training (i.e., rotations), which hinders future growth prospects, or that getting to and staying within what would likely be a step into a supervisory position is not worth the sacrifice. Participant 85E676 reported, “They would have to change the job series because there is no promotion potential in this current job.” For some participants, including Participant 62Q572, it was “because there are fewer opportunities at the higher levels.” Each acknowledged in his or her own way that the higher up the organizational pyramid one goes, the more constricted the space becomes in which people can fit.

For others, a driving interest was just not present. For example, Participant 82X092, a GS-14 admitted, “I think I could apply for one level up, but I have no desire to. Some people have encouraged it, but I have no interest.” When Participant 63J226 discussed his satisfaction with what he considers to be opportunities for improvement, he candidly stated, “To be very honest with you, I’m not looking for that.” Here the participant accepts that he has already attained about as high as he can possibly go within Agency X yet acknowledges there are opportunities outside the agency that might prove fruitful should he decide that course of action. He repeated the word *if* when describing

the likelihood of continuing to advance, as in, “If that were something I was aspiring to and if I wanted to go outside of the agency.” In this case, even at the highest levels of the agency, an employee, once content, feels there is no reason to progress any further.

Not all the perspectives shared addressed limitations, however. Similar to Participant 75G948, a GS-13 who feels “like there’s a lot more room for advancement,” a few participants are satisfied with their present and future opportunities for growth. This outlook is shared through a long-term career perspective. Participant 89T677 stated, “I think it takes time for those opportunities to present themselves. I think they’re out there.” Participant 71D731 followed up with what he feels needs to occur while waiting for the opportunities to present themselves. He stated, “I have to take a lot of classes that teach me how to better perform my job, as well as how to perform other work functions that I may need to know in order to further my career.” Whether or not an employee is satisfied with what he or she feels are acceptable opportunities for advancement, the viewpoints shared may begin to offer insight into what could be genuine barriers for employees. On the other hand, regardless of what the actual barriers might be, other participants’ views suggest that, given enough time, there will always be chances for position ascendancy.

Estimation of serving in a senior or SES position. As requirements for, and the satisfaction of, opportunities to advance unfolded, the researcher was able to expand a little further beyond the individuals’ perceptions of themselves within their own environment and explore their perceptions of others at higher levels outside of the individuals’ environment. In conveying the participants’ opinions, the researcher initially directs attention to those who are at senior levels and lower and not yet at the executive level. Participant 65L878, a GS-12, stated the following:

I've only interacted with a couple of SES in the agency, and they have been helpful. They're really smart people. I've only had positive interactions with them. I could see myself serving at that level. That's one of my goals if I stay within the government is to get to that level.

This quote suggests that the limited interaction the employee has had with SES has been largely positive, which may contribute to the goal of eventually attaining the executive level.

Although many participants explained their appreciation for the position, Participant 65L878 was the only lower level participant to describe such a positive experience with the position. The other positive descriptions came from the SES. In describing personal involvement in the executive position, Participant 87W595, an SES, stated the following:

It's terrific. I'm convinced that I have the ability to change things that I think need to be changed. I've always worked for people that have given me a great deal of autonomy which is very important to me. The work is important and I think we have the ability to focus on improving our support to customers.

In this description, the participant explains the importance of being allotted the freedom to be a leader. To this individual, having the capacity to enable changes and improvements is an essential element. Having independence to be a leader was also shared by Participant 63J226, another SES, who said the following about the position:

I like it because it allows me to—it gives you a lot of freedom. It gives you a lot of freedom to think, to be innovative, and to work at a level—Nobody comes down to me every day and says, “[Peter], this is what I want you to do today.” You're on your own an awful lot. You're given a very wide berth and you're given some generic guidelines. “Here's the plan, you have these initiatives. Go forth and do good things.”

Taken together, these examples show the affirmative postures of those either seeking for or having already obtained the highest levels the agency has to offer. With this in mind, consideration of additional viewpoints should offer clarification.

In discussions with other participants, it became clear that some employees do not aspire to be a possessor of more lofty positions, yet they “have a lot of respect for it, the process, and what they have to deal with” (Participant 89T677). Participant 75G948 explained this as follows:

When you get to be at a higher level, you have a lot more responsibility with a lot more eyes on you. You still have to be a leader and guide people and set a good example for everyone that’s under you.

Participant 61U063 stated, “By observing other leaders; I know it’s a challenge because it’s hard work.” Participant 79A648 offered, “I’m not sure if at my age that I would even enjoy being a SES.” In this case, the employees have appreciation for the executive-level positions, but, from their observations, being at that level does not presently appeal to them.

Some participants shared a little less appreciation, and a little more frustration, through their opinion of the senior and executive positions. Participant 62Q572 stated the following:

My general opinion of senior leadership positions is that there are a whole lot of politics. I don’t like playing the mind games and hiding information from people. From how it looks down at my level, I don’t like what I see.

A couple more frustrations are highlighted. One is emphasized by Participant 89D001 regarding the amount of taskers who flow down to senior and mid-level leaders:

I am not interested in serving in a senior or SES position. I think there are way too many taskings that come from headquarters that have little to do with what the everyday job is. This takes from a supervisor’s time that he should be using to – well, supervise and help.

These additional tasks or responsibilities that come through tasking memos from the executive levels keep leaders from doing what they personally feel leaders should be doing. Another shared frustration with employees’ appraisal of service in the senior or

SES positions is having a lack of control or access to adequate resources, as Participant 75D725, a GS-15, emphasized:

I've got a lukewarm opinion as far as, I do think you have a lot of responsibility and limited decision making authority. When you're in command, typically a key element of command is being able to control resources. So it leaves me to wonder when I have to go ask, "Mother may I" for everything, what are you really in command of?

Participant 82X092 summed up both of these frustrations by tying the two together. She shares that essentially one upsets the other:

I don't get the opportunity to exercise the responsibilities of the position that I should be able to exercise because I'm bogged down answering internal focused trivia. They're paying us at a level that we should be shaping our organization yet we're not given the time or resources to do it. They could get the same level of work from a GS-12 most days with what they make me do. It makes you wonder, are the GS-12s doing what the GS-9s are doing? And what are the GS-9's doing?

A key focus from her statement is the overall management of resources throughout the agency, in which leaders are being handicapped by lack of access to adequate resources. According to Participant 82X092, executive-level leaders do not give senior-level leaders the resources to perform senior-level quality work. Instead, due to the lack of adequate resources, the only work they have access to is at a level beneath their capability, which is something lower level employees can and should be doing. The issue may also lend itself to unnecessary redundancy in the process. In other words, some GS-12s might be doing GS-9 work, but they might also still be doing some GS-12-level work. Yet, if GS-15s do not have the resources to do GS-15-level work and are instead relegated to doing GS-12-level work, confusion could occur through redundancy and the resultant miscommunications.

A candid estimation of service at the SES level was shared by Participant 89T677, who is personally frustrated with where she feels the SES priorities are with regard to that

level's rank of importance:

I personally can pick up where the priorities are. I just went to a conference last month and in one of the general sessions was a panel of SES that were just talking to 400 people about why they're an SES, meaning "Here's how great it is and these are the books I read." I sat there the whole time thinking this is what I don't like about the government because the way they're talking is, "If you don't want to be an SES then what are you doing here because this is what we all want to do." Yet we don't all want to do that. I'm not sure it's a good use of time and money to sit me here for an hour to listen to your favorite books about leadership. That's the detachment for me, I think I'm more the humanistic person who's like, "Not everybody is born a leader and not everybody can be developed into a leader, but you're still in a leadership position." So you need to remember who you're leading.

Here she was sharing how senior executives made it a priority to be at the top and may very well believe it should be a priority for everyone. She continued by alluding to the need for executives to look beyond themselves and be sensitive to others' views or inabilities to reach the executive levels. Although it may be good for some employees to know of the types of books that executives read, employees the researcher met with gave indication they wanted something a little more than that.

For example, Participant 88B511 shared that "part of the SES position is to help those below that position achieve higher levels of performance." Yet, there is a belief among some that executives are more concerned with themselves and their own advancement than with those at the lower levels, as shared by Participant 89D001:

Honestly, I really don't think our agency leaders really care at all about the professional development of those under them at all any more. In the past 10 years or so, from my viewpoint, most leaders are out for themselves, and the only reason why they may appear to be interested in your development and advancement is because they have to get that box checked off.

When asked further regarding how interested they believed current executive agency leaders were about the participants' professional development and advancement, a few participants were forthright in their statements.

Participant 78A644 said, “I can’t say that I think they are at all right now.

Participant 81S777 reported, “I don’t think they are interested at all.” Participant 92K021 shared, “I honestly feel there isn’t interest in my personal development.” Participant 85U352 agreed in an unusual way by laughing cynically and then following up the laugh by saying, “That’s how I feel about it!” Although Participant 75D725, a GS-15, tended to view the present scenario similarly, he delved a little deeper and explained why agency executives might not appear as interested in lower level employees’ advancement opportunities. He offered the following comment:

I don’t think there’s really a senior leader out there that really cares about my professional development. At this level you could perhaps be viewed as a threat to them. If I’m seeking a promotion opportunity, it probably is after one of those senior positions in the organization.

The next step for a GS-15 to make in the advancement hierarchy is to become an executive, which could potentially mean competition for a current executive’s position. In contrast, however, there are employees who are pleased with the attention given to them by agency executive leaders, as shared by Participant 61U063, who stated, “Some executive agency leaders are concerned about my professional development and advancement within the agency. Participant 82X092 attributed some of the attention to luck by stating, “I’ve been lucky to work for people who are very interested in my development and pushed me.”

Some of the motivation for executives to show interest, however, may be due to the concern to fill the gaps because of retirements or other forms of attrition. Participant 75G948 stated the following:

I feel like it’s important to senior and executive leaders that everyone has the attitude that they want to help; that they want to develop people they think are going to be future leaders. They want the people who come in after them to walk in their footsteps and pick up where they left off. I feel like they want to see you

succeed and not fail.

Similarly, Participant 71D731 shared the following:

I feel there is currently a lot of interest. From what I have heard, there are a large number of employees in the agency that will be retiring in the near future. The current executive agency leaders are pushing to bring in and train individuals, like me, to be ready to step in to those retiree's shoes when they do choose to leave. The current executive agency leaders are trying to minimize the loss of knowledge as best they can with interns like me.

Participant 62Q572, an employee who has had the opportunity to participate in one of the agency's centralized development programs, stated the following:

A couple of weeks ago, I would have said they don't even know who I am, but oddly enough I answered the phone from headquarters. I didn't even say anything about my leadership training situation and they flat out said, "How are things going with your training?" I thought, "Wow, people know who I am, they know what I'm in, they know what I'm doing. They care." It's rare that you hear about it, but somebody up there does know it. And it's nice when they communicate that. I didn't ask, but I thought, "How did you know about me and my situation?" It shocked me. My name is floating around up there.

Having a number of participants indicate their displeasure regarding executive-level interest and yet also having a number of participants indicate the complete opposite indicates a potential lack of congruency with the type of outreach occurring and information is being flowed from executive levels.

Perspectives on Retention

Retirement as a facilitator. The overwhelming majority of participants stated they plan to remain in the federal government at least until they are eligible to retire. This makes sense for some because either they only have a few years remaining until they retire or they are already eligible to retire. When also considering whether to remain with Agency X for at least the next few years, most participants stated their intent to remain, with one participant even sharing how she had been with the agency since high school. She is now a GS-11. Participant 75G948, a GS-13, shared some of the perks of staying

with the agency. She stated the following:

There are a lot of amazing opportunities here and it's helped me grow not only in my work life, and personal life, but there are great benefits and a flexible work schedule. I have a little son, so if I need to leave because he's sick and pick him up from school, I've never had a problem with a supervisor telling me I can't leave or that I have to work at home. If I do have to work at home they are very flexible, so I don't see myself going anywhere.

Intent to remain. Some would like to stay until they are eligible to retire but are concerned there are no promotion opportunities available for them to do so. Participant 85E676 stated, "So, my option is to seek out career development outside the agency."

Looking outside the agency seems to be the most common sentiment for those planning to advance while remaining with the federal government, as also illustrated by Participant 65L878: "I'm looking at all opportunities for promotions to advance. Anything that will lead to a promotion or advancement, even if it's outside of the agency, I am keeping my options open." Participant 92K021 offered this synopsis when she made the following comment:

It's always an option. If I can't continue to progress the way that I need to or the way that I feel that I need to and I can get other opportunities elsewhere, then I have to take them. My goal when I started with the government was to retire with the government. I'm a person that wants to progress, but if I can't progress then I might feel like I don't have any other option.

Some, however, are not content with future prospects, even within the general federal government, and are instead open to looking toward the private sector. For example, Participant 88B511, a GS-15, stated the following:

If I had an opportunity come along from private industry that I think would challenge me a little more because I don't feel like I'm challenged in my position here, based on my experience and everything to date; if I had a lucrative or a very good opportunity to move into private industry I would probably take that.

A similar and interesting opinion was shared by another GS-15, Participant 75D725, who shared, "I'm open to new opportunities. I was on the fence when I came

into federal service. I had private sector opportunities and I chose the opportunity to come to the agency. I could be open to leaving government service for the right opportunity.” The motivator for either leaving or staying with Agency X would be for improved opportunities. A couple of the main opportunities are for better pay or wanting to feel more challenged. However, even money may not be the ultimate driver. Participant 65L878 said, “More than getting the money, I like to be challenged I don’t like to be stagnant and not feel like I’m being challenged.” Taken together, although pay is important, employees want suitable challenges that can offer new opportunities beyond the daily mundane.

Pathway for Progression

Progression attractors. Money remains one of the reasons for some employees to leave either the agency or federal service. Financial gain, which includes “increased economics, better lifestyle, and better retirement,” as remarked by Participant 79A648, was the most common theme among nearly every participant’s motivation for progressing along the pathway to higher levels of status. However, in addition to money, many also cited other reasons for desires to advance. Participant 87W595, an SES, expressed optimism that an employee’s intent was “hopefully to drive agency performance improvement in bigger and broader ways to make a lasting difference.” This executive can rest assured that creating positive change for the agency was on the list for many participants.

For example, Participant 81S777 stated, “Give back for what’s been given to you, a love of the business, want to help others grow.” Participant 88B511 reported, “I think some people would aspire to be a leader to have a positive impact on the mission and the people that they’re responsible for.” Participant 82X092 indicated wanting to make a

change. Participant 75G948 stated, “I think people have it in their mind that they want to direct the agency down a better path. They want to be able to lead everyone in a better direction and make everything better.” Participant 65L878 indicated being able to help people succeed. Participant 61U063 emphasized making changes to better the agency as well as the employees. Participant 71D731 reported, “I also believe that there are many people who have lots of ideas of how to better help the war fighter and would like to serve in one of these positions to improve the agency.” Participant 89T677 stated, “I think people start off with the intent of making things better, to make changes, to have that opportunity, and I believe the good in that.”

In addition to making a difference, other attractors to trying to get ahead were prestige, ego, and power. Nevertheless, Participant 88B511 reported, “People should always be pursuing a higher pay grade,” and Participant 63J226 stated, “To me, you always want to be growing. You always want to be taking a position.” There are opportunities to progress for those who do not wish to have supervisory responsibilities. Therefore, Participant 92K021 shares that there is nothing that should keep someone from progressing:

Why wouldn't they want to? That's just a normal progression. I get that not everybody wants to be a supervisor, but not all upper management positions are supervisory. You shouldn't stop progressing ever. I don't care where you get or find yourself, there's always room for growth and improvement. So why would you want to stand still and not do anything further. To me it's normal progression. To progress.

Here the employee suggests that one can always grow and improve, perhaps hinting that, even if barriers do exist, it is possible to get around them if a person is willing to not stop trying.

In attempting to determine common themes among the types of progression

qualities that attract people, the researcher discovered some compelling motives from a few outlying ideas that stood out as a result of their unique perspectives. For example, Participant 87W595 explained that, once a person achieves the pinnacle of executive within the agency, the focus has to be more on others instead of self, because, at that level, “There really are no financial or other benefits or incentives. In fact, for many, leaving the GS system for SES is a pay and benefits cut believe it or not.” If a job becomes vacant, essentially any qualified person could fill it. However, that also means that, although they are qualified, there might be aspects of their personality or leadership style that are difficult for others to work with.

Participant 82X092 offered insight by stating, “One of the motives is fear for who might get the position if it’s not me.” Participant 89T677 shared the experience of someone who followed through on this motive by making the following comment:

I had a supervisor tell me she became a boss because she was tired of listening to other people tell her what to do. She didn’t really want to do it, but she did it because she couldn’t stand somebody else telling her what to do all the time, so she decided to become the boss.

Although probably not commonly considered enticements for advancement, the lack of additional incentives at the top and the potentially disturbing outcomes of a less desirable leader filling a vacancy might be enough to attract leaders with sincere motives.

Progression detractors that lead to refusal. When considering reasons why very qualified individuals do not advance into senior or executive leadership roles, the researcher found some of the responses to be similar to the attractors. Pay and financial position for retirement were two that, as attractors, are considered great motivators. However, both are considered as potential detractors as well. In considering this, Participant 87W595 confirmed that “lack of financial incentives to move into the

spotlight” could be an important reason that would keep people from progressing.

Participant 62Q572, a GS-12, expanded the subject of financial restriction when she said, “It’s not a huge pay jump from the previous position long enough. The money does not go up enough to take on that next level of responsibility. Cost wise, it’s not worth it.” Here, the pay is not worth the required responsibility to fill the position, especially if they are already making more money at a level with less accountability. Participant 88B511 asked a question that represented the type of reflection many qualified leaders are asking: “So, what’s my incentive for taking on additional responsibility, because I’m really not going to get compensated for that?”

Given that more responsibility is required at higher levels, the concept of additional responsibilities was a frequent response participants provided as a likely deterrent to ascending the organizational ladder. For example, Participant 75G948 offered the following comment:

It’s a lot of responsibility. I’ve actually had people say, ‘I don’t want to be in the office until late at night because it’s a lot of work and responsibility and there’s always all eyes on you’. Some people don’t want that. They don’t want the responsibility or the headaches.

In articulating her own experience as someone who was in a leadership position but then applied and was accepted into a lateral position as an attempt to get out of her leadership position, Participant 78A644 picked up where Participant 75G948 ended with the following statement:

So they ask themselves, “Is it worth their health?” It’s really a no-win situation. I’m speaking from my own experience in this location, which may not be the same as other places. People think twice about putting in for leadership positions. Some people think, well, I’m going to put in for it anyway, it can’t be that bad. Then they get in and realize it really is that bad.

In these cases, participants emphasize that pay, power, and prestige are not

enough to compensate for what they consider potential detractors to advancement.

Similarly, Participant 85U352 shared, “They don’t want the frustration.” Participant 89T677, a GS-12 with a master’s degree, and one who is at a level to have a clear eye on senior and potentially executive positions, acknowledged that, in the journey to ascend, “There’s a lot that you have to be held accountable for. There’s a lot that you have to be up against.” A follow-up to this was offered by Participant 78G101, a GS-13, as one who is even one step closer to a senior-level position. He admitted that the issue of taking on additional responsibility could be a genuine deterrent for some. He said, “Just the stress level, the more expectations, the more responsibility that you will have. The higher the executive level, the more people you’re dealing with, which comes with a whole handful of things.”

Provided that employees under the executive level may find the requirement for additional responsibility to be possibly a bit intimidating as they climb to higher levels, the perspective of those already in an executive position may offer clarifying insight. Participant 87W595 began by saying he understands that the “likelihood of becoming a target” could be intimidating. Then Participant 63J226 described how frustrating it might be for some people:

You’re dealing with different people and the more people you deal with that are different than you and the more topics that you deal with that you’re not familiar with, the more uncomfortable it is, the more difficult it becomes. It’s slow, it’s tedious. Sometimes it’s exhausting. It requires a lot of hours. And a lot of people say, “You know what, I’m just not interested in doing all that.”

Participants indicated that the difficulty and sluggishness that come with being at the top may not be what a lot of people want. Moreover, some feel that the weight of additional responsibility is only compounded with the politics they see at higher levels, as has already been expressed in this chapter by some participants. Participant 85E676

affirmed that some are “not willing to go into that political situation because you still have key players within the organization that they cannot change their mind of how to do business.” Here the employee alludes to an unchangeable mindset that she feels is prevalent among some of the agency’s present leaders and would therefore prefer not to work in that sort of environment. Additionally, Participant 62Q572 stated, “I would rather be in a position where I can make a difference and create those relationships with our customers or where I can be useful instead of at the top where I’m under some need to play a political game.

Being in a situation in which one feels that he or she can have an influential impact, regardless of the organizational level, seems to be more important than being involved in the apparent hassles at higher levels. Yet, one of the most common hassles or detractors that seems to be preventing potential leaders from pursuing more responsibility is the problem of frequent taskers, as mentioned previously. These taskers or tasking memos are requirements that usually initiate from the headquarters level and flow down to the region and CMOs. Participant 89D001 offered reference to this when she stated, “A lot of headaches from above; upper headquarters always requesting data in taskings.” In addition to this, Participant 82X092 expounded beyond the general frustration and describes the affect it can have on those like her who directly interface with the taskers:

What makes me very dissatisfied is the lack of time or resources to do what I think a director should be doing because of all the demands placed on me by other organizations like the chief operating officer’s staff. All the taskers and reportings and the databases we need to clean up today. We do so much internal churn just to answer those above us, which they are above us and they get to pick to do that, but then it takes away from the satisfying part of the job.

Here, the GS-14 employee describes how extra taskings have a tendency to take away from the actual task of being a supervisor that causes her to turn her focus away

from where she feels it really needs to be. Additionally, employees receive enough taskers that their attention is directed to those that seem most pressing or can be completed quickly. As a result, the tasking memos that offer training opportunities are sidelined, delayed, and eventually dismissed.

In describing how tasking memos create more, and potentially unnecessary, work for senior leaders and the general workforce, an interesting perspective was shared from Participant 71D731, an employee at the GS-9 level: “Many, I believe, think their time would be better spent working on the contracts instead of fulfilling all the administrative responsibilities that are placed on them.” Being at the GS-9 level offers an interesting vantage point to observe how the extra administrative responsibilities can affect the workforce as the taskings trickle down through the ranks.

The irony of the situation is that, once a tasker reaches the region or CMOs, local leaders might add supplementary requirements, creating even more work for themselves as well as those still at lower levels. Participant 78A644 shared the following about her experience as a former supervisor:

I used to be a supervisor. The taskers from headquarters are incessant. I would have an entire notebook of all my taskers and it just kept coming. Our leadership here would give us a lot of taskers. So, when headquarters says they need a report or PowerPoint slide on something with a short suspense date, it's crazy, but there's really nobody to do it. They've tried to pay attention to the number of taskers they send us, but it's a ridiculous number. There's no help to do it, but someone has to do it, these clerical things. A supervisor doesn't have anyone to give it to because it detracts from the job. So we just do it ourselves.

Thus, local senior leaders seem to succumb to menial clerical tasks in addition to their supervisory duties rather than continually trying to contest the number of taskers they receive.

Another detractor to progression is that of comfort. There are three examples

shared by participants. The first is a general view of comfort. Participant 78G101, stated, “I think that there are just those that are satisfied with the job that they’re doing. Some get into a position and they enjoy the work they’re doing.” The second deals with the phase of an employee’s career. Participant 65L878 stated, “Older employees, they just want to ride it out, they’re comfortable. They know their job and how to do it.” The third is of an old mindset that seems to still be with some members of the workforce. Participant 75D725 reported, “Their comfort level and unwillingness to want to change; people becoming comfortable in their job and not willing to progress; thinking they’re going to advance by just doing what they’ve always done.”

An interesting follow-on to this comment is offered by a financial and business executive director at the agency’s headquarters who shares that there are some who may think they are due or simply that it is their turn for a promotion because they have been in a position for a certain period of time. Similarly, Participant 88B511 shared, “Many times, I think the workforce has the idea that if I stay where I am long enough and do a good enough job, those developmental programs or opportunities for promotion will come to me.” Participant 89T677 described her experience of this by stating, “In my last agency office, there was just promotion based on who had been around. The person hiring them fell back on, ‘Well they’ve been here and this is the natural progression based more on tenure than experience.’” Seldom should this be the case anymore.

In contrast, the financial and business executive director feels that employees need to get out of their comfort zone because if they do not then they may eventually find that zone could have been what was needed to give them the edge they needed to progress. She stated, “They haven’t gone in the doors that have been opened.” Another executive, Participant 63J226, also acknowledged that, although one can become

comfortable, if he or she wants to progress, he or she must do the following:

Constantly move out of the comfort zone. So when you get good at something you like being really good at things because people tell you you're really good at it. So that's exactly the reason why. You've mastered that, so now go onto the more complicated things.

In discussions regarding the level of comfort that employees may have that is preventing them from applying greater focus on progressing up the organizational structure, the researcher provided some instances of participants suggesting reasonable motives for voluntarily remaining stationary. Participant 75G948 explained as follows:

They may absolutely have what it takes, but it's just not something they're interested in doing. Some people don't want leadership roles. They want nonsupervisory positions. They would rather work on technical things at a higher level than have to lead people. It can be difficult because you get difficult personalities. Some people don't want to have to interface with other people. They want to work independently.

Here the employee describes differences in personality, such as those who are more technically minded and those who are more content to not interact with other people. This sentiment was supported by Participant 65L878:

I don't think leadership is for everyone. I think some people have different personalities where they just want to do their work, hide in the corner and not deal with people. That would deter people, someone who's an introvert and doesn't want to deal with people and just wants to do their job.

Participant 71D731 related how employees identifying with the mission of the agency may feel their effectiveness is best served elsewhere: "There are individuals who believe they could do more for the war fighter outside of the senior and executive leadership roles." Therefore, this suggests some individuals are content to place limits on themselves, believing that the level of responsibility they reach is equal to their own level of success, as identified by Participant 88B511, who stated, "Some people say, 'All I want to do is become a GS-9' and that's their level of success. I think it depends on what

the individual's level of success is defined as."

However, Participant 75D725 took it a step further, suggesting that not only might individuals place a limit on themselves, but they might have no choice but to remain limited in their ascendancy potential. He stated, "Some people don't have the capacity; they have a natural ceiling to them that they really can't advance any further regardless of what training is offered to them. There's a natural cap to most people." Thus, even though an employee may be highly motivated and willing to progress, one's own nature can become a progression limiter. Training can then only do so much for a person.

A commonly mentioned detractor to progression opportunities for participants was mobility, or changing geography, meaning, "their unwillingness to move to where the opportunities are," as stated by Participant 88B511. Participant 75G948 expressed some frustration with those who allow mobility to limit their progression. She shared, "I've heard people say, 'There's not room for advancement,' but I feel you have to open your eyes because it may not be right here in your agency, but it may be in another agency or location." This comment focuses on the point that, although a position may not be readily available in the present agency, it should not stop a person from progressing, even if it means going to another agency. The participant hints that one should be open to the possibility of needing to relocate geographically.

One of the main reasons mobility becomes an issue is due to concerns for how a move could affect members of the employee's family. Participant 82X092 highlighted this when she said, "Some of them could advance quickly but they want to wait until their children are older, so they don't apply for the next higher level because they're waiting." Participant 75D725 confirmed the sentiment by adding the following comment:

The biggest one are constraints people put on opportunities; geographic location

is a big constraint, an unwillingness to expand their geographic location. There's a personal side to it. Some people have outside commitments that they can't commit to the energy required for a higher level position that may be due to family demands or kids.

Participant 65L878 expressed a similar opinion but added alternatively that, in order to take care of one's family, the individual may eventually have to move. He stated the following:

Having to move. Having to uproot your family. It still comes down to having to move and the location thing. If it gets to the point if you're not moving, advancing, or making more money, and things aren't getting any cheaper, then you have to take care of your family and do what you need to do.

Interestingly, however, if potential and current leaders are unwilling to move, then leadership tends to stay in one location, essentially contributing to the perception of the good-old-boy network for that area. Even immobility at the SES level can cause the progressive flow of agency personnel to become sluggish, as shared by

Participant 75D725:

There hasn't been a lot of turnover at the SES level. They've been pretty stagnant for a while, but the core has really been there for quite some time. So the opportunity isn't there. Folks in the SES level of the agency tend to come here and spend a while in those positions and that prevents folks at the GS-15 layer from having the opportunity to compete for those types of positions.

Thus, although it is important for lower levels to be willing to be mobile for advancement opportunities, so too might it be beneficial for SES to periodically rotate through the executive levels. Doing so may influence growth, maturity, and progress among the workforce.

Yet, the reality of the situation was shared that, even if one wanted to progress, when an organizational structure is shaped like a pyramid, progression becomes more difficult because a pyramid continually narrows and eventually pinches off at the top.

For example, Participant 62Q572 stated the following:

There are only so many slots that can be filled the higher up you go. It's got to be self-filtering. You do need to have only those who do qualify to get that far, if you just made it the most, attractive, gold piece, everybody really may not be the best candidate who is grasping for that gold position.

This was similarly characterized by Participant 88B511, who stated the following:

As you go higher, there are fewer and fewer opportunities. I'm a GS-15. I have about 14 GS-14s working under me trying to get the one GS-15 position if they're willing to move. It's a pyramidal type of advancement structure. We only have one three-star lieutenant general.

Participant 78A644 stated, "In my opinion, the agency is upside down in its manning." For more employees to advance and for healthy flow to occur, the classic management pyramid structure may need to evolve. As organizations approach the second decade of the 21st century, they may find either a greater need for or greater pressure from various sources to restructure or overhaul the classical management structure (Nayar, 2008).

In a pyramidal structure, reaching further down into the lower organizational levels is the area in which the higher number of employees is located and, hence, a greater pool of people or a higher number of untapped leadership base capable of being trained. The dilemma is the balance of reaching down as far as possible without dumbing down the qualification process and still being able to offer the highest quality of training in order to qualify the greatest number of employees, or potential SES.

The practicality of the end reward. There was no consensus among the participants as to how the attractors compared with the detractors. Some said the detractors were greater, whereas a nearly equal amount said the attractors were more prevalent. There was no solid response from either side. However, Participant 71D731 summed it up nicely when he offered the following statement:

I believe for certain individuals the attractors far out weight the detractors, but I

also believe there are some individuals that the detractors would be deal breakers. In the end I believe that there are individuals that would pursue these roles no matter what. They just have a determination to rise to that level within the government and will not be stopped.

Moreover, Participant 78G101 offered a positive view on how to approach the situation with the following comment:

In my opinion, if you could see a position was going to be more on the satisfying side of things, you would want to move in that direction. You're going to have bad days no matter what, but if you have more good days than bad days then I think you've won half the battle right there.

A key to furthering advancement within the agency might lie in trying to ensure that more employees see a position as going to be more on the satisfying side of things.

Otherwise, as has already been shared, for those not advancing or unwilling to advance, it may be that the practicality of the reward at the end is not enough to convince employees it is worth the venture.

Making Information Available

In the previous section, the researcher described the various attractors and detractors as outlined by the interview participants and from information observed through field notes. The researcher ended with the suggestion by one of the participants who explained that helping employees view a job position as a satisfactory means of progression could be beneficial. Next, the researcher focuses on the emergent theme of ensuring that essential information reaches all employees, in turn allowing the workforce to make educated decisions regarding their future career path.

Current understanding. During the study, the researcher took the opportunity to inquire into employees' current understanding of the available leadership-development programs. Most had at least heard of the centralized development program, which consists of various developmental programs sponsored by the OPM. Although a few had

actually participated in at least one of the centralized development programs, others who had never participated in the program were still able to share some familiarity. The majority of participants listed developmental programs that Agency X used to host but are now defunct. Some participants could describe features about a centralized development program but not remember its identifying title.

Other participants were aware that leadership-development opportunities existed, although they were more familiar with the technical training opportunities, such as the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act and the current agency-hosted supervisory training course entitled DLead 201. Some of the participants shared that they know about leadership- development training but have chosen not to apply because they say they already received the equivalent training while in the military. A couple of participants were even able to give an account of training opportunities throughout the history of the agency all the way back to the early 1990s.

Those who had actually participated in some portion of the centralized development program had favorable opinions of the program. A couple of employees had attended multiple courses within the program over the courses of their careers. Participant 63J226, who is now an SES, explained the general levels of the course offerings within the program and how many he has attended:

There's a whole bunch of good leadership programs. I mean I've been to just about all of them. There's the executive development program. There's the centralized development training. Inside there it's broken out by grade. GS-12s go to this, GS-13, GS-14, GS-15, then you get executive level courses, then there's things like Naval War College, Senior Executive Fellowship at Harvard, Federal Executive Institute, and there's ICAF.

Participant 82X092 has also been with the agency, or at least the federal government, long enough to have participated in more than one of the program's courses. She stated

the following:

They're available depending on your current grade or position. There are different programs for different stages of your life. I've been lucky enough to be selected over the course of 35 years for a couple of those programs and they've been very beneficial. For me, it was eye opening to get an appreciation of the points of view of people above us.

Participant 82X092 is now a GS-14 and feels the program has helped her gain a greater understanding of leadership at levels higher than her own.

However, not all participants were as favorable in their understanding of the program. For example, Participant 89D001 stated, "A fallacy in the program, in my opinion, is that there are not many that are offered to GS-11s. Most of the programs are for GS-12s and above so it's like the agency isn't looking at advancing GS-11s."

Participant 89D001 raised an interesting point that could suggest that leadership training and, potentially by default, advancement, begins only at the GS-12 level. Participant 79A648 seemed only slightly aware that a program exists. He said, "In my mind, we do not have a structured developmental program for senior leaders in the agency. It's only in the last 2 to 3 years that we've only started getting information on these." Here, the participant shared that information was not available until recently. What is significant is that this employee is a GS-15. The researcher explains later how information regarding the programs is communicated throughout the agency.

Application process. Once employees becomes aware of what the centralized development program is and what it has to offer, they then learn that there is a lengthy application process. Participant 75G948 described the process of applying to the program as follows:

I did apply for one. You have to put together a whole package that has to go through your supervisor, then your group leader. By the time it makes its way out, there are so many people that are on it. So if you don't get through that process

and have it submitted right away there may be less of a chance to get accepted. I never really learned the whole process of that.

The application process has become a barrier for some who were originally in favor of learning more about the program.

However, once they discovered more about the application completion process, it became a demotivator, as shared by Participant 62Q572, who stated, “There were a couple people I knew who wanted to apply but then determined it was too much work at the time to get the package ready.” Participant 65L878 added, “The application process is pretty lengthy for most of them.” Employees expressed enough interest in the program to read beyond the original notification; however, upon discovering the length and complexity of the application process, they determined it was not enough of a priority to complete the application. The difficult application process may have been designed purposefully to weed out those who are not willing to find a way to complete an extra task in addition to their current job responsibilities. An illustration of this was shared by Participant 85E676:

These notifications come out every year and you compete for the program depending on your grade. It’s a good program, but it’s very competitive. Everyone has to put in a packet. The packet has specific requirements that are already given in the tasking memo, i.e. resume, accomplishments, letter of recommendation or consideration. The forms are specific and tell you exactly what you need to put. It’s a very short turnaround. If you can’t work under pressure and get your paperwork ready you have a lot more to do. You have maybe 2 weeks to get your documentation, presentation, and submit your packet because there are submission deadlines. There is a quick turnaround. That’s how we see who can work under pressure.

In contrast, just because an employee does not complete the application process does not mean he or she is an inferior performer. It could be that either the employees are top performers in their function and, therefore, do not have time to fill out the packet. Similarly, due to their exceptional functional performance, the supervisor may determine

that it is a waste of an employee's time to go through the application process. Participant 75D725, a GS-15 senior supervisor, provided a description of this:

Typically, your highest performers are not ones that you're going to want to let go away to school or these details. Your lower performers are those that have time to fill out the applications and leaders are more likely to let those employees attend because they're not as reliant upon them.

Therefore, programs such as the centralized development program might actually be accepting employees who are not the agency's top performers. Additionally, a supervisor's self-interest and desire to keep the top performers in the workplace rather than attend training could ultimately inhibit the leadership growth of the agency. Essentially, the employee's senior leader is refusing the opportunity for the employees by refusing to let them attend.

Once the application package is submitted, the filtering process continues. Although some may expect to be accepted into a program, not everybody will be admitted. Participant 75D725 also explained as follows:

Everybody that puts these packages in thinks they're entitled to an endorsement. That's not the case. It's alright to send a package forward with a less than favorable endorsement, but they're not entitled to give the person a favorable endorsement. I do emphasize that. They're entitled to put in for a program, but they're not entitled to attend it.

In addition to those who prefer not to follow through with the application process, due to its general cumbersomeness, there are those whose current understanding may prevent them from applying because of, as mentioned previously, the practicality of the end reward. Participant 79A648 offered the following comment:

We have a whole other large group that never applies for those programs because they don't want to move. It will be a negative on the family, particularly for the longer courses that you need as you get into the GS-14 to GS-15 level, particularly if you're looking to someday be an SES at headquarters.

Thus, both the employees and their supervisors may see the current application process as

a barrier to advancement. However, the process can also be used as a filter to determine those who genuinely want to attend the program and may be capable of successfully completing both the application and the course.

Advertising and the flow of information. In describing their understanding of training opportunities available for assisting employees with leadership advancement, participants shared mixed views on the agency's effectiveness in informing the workforce regarding the opportunities. According to Participant 63J226, historically, the necessary information intended for the overall agency workforce was not publicized effectively. However, that has evolved and improved. He stated the following:

I think, back in the old days, I would say it wasn't advertised as well as it could be. Now, we've come a long ways since then and now everything is posted to 360 and to the agency homepage and all the classes and all of the different opportunities come out in tasking memorandums. So it's a lot better in terms of getting it out to everybody. So, unless you're not paying attention and if you're not, shame on you, but I think we advertise about as well as it can be advertised.

Thus, according to Participant 63J226, the agency has improved the way it offers information and is, therefore, meeting a satisfactory threshold. A couple of training and internship coordinators also perceived this level of satisfaction. One of the responsibilities of training and internship coordinators is to ensure that training information that flows from headquarters to them is clearly communicated to employees participating in either internships or routine training. Participant 75G948, a training and internship coordinator shared the following:

I think it's very clear. They send out the email notification saying, "Here's a new opportunity to be a part of a leadership program." They give you the due date and other info. There is usually a memo link where you can go and read more about it on the agency website. I feel like the information is very clear and is something you can easily find.

Hence, due to the intimate interaction of training and internship coordinators with

the flow of communication, they are in a position to easily discern the information being shared. Another training and internship coordinator, Participant 61U063, also supported the current flow of information to the workforce but offered a caveat as to why some employees still do not apply for the program. She said, “I believe it was advertised enough, but it’s just that some employees lost the motivation to apply because they felt like it will not help their career due to favoritism within the agency.” Therefore, if information is being communicated effectively, employees are still being hindered because of a potential relationship-based hiring system.

In truth, whether the system remains within the agency, the perception of a good-old-boy network, as shared previously, remains. However, Participant 75D725, a GS-15 deputy, acknowledged there is a fair level of awareness being made to employees yet offered a suggestion for ensuring that the necessary information gets reported to lower level employees. He affirmed, “The agency does a reasonably good job of advertising the opportunities through memos, but the most effective way to deliver it is talking about the opportunities.” Here, the ability to talk verbally about the opportunities, beyond the virtual messages of email and webpages, is offered as a way to further improve the flow of information throughout the agency, which will be discussed more in a later section.

However, many employees were not as favorable in their views toward the effectiveness of the flow of information that is communicated throughout the agency, particularly with regard to training and advancement opportunities. Participant 78A644 stated, “I don’t think it’s being advertised at all,” suggesting a lack of any form of announcement to the workforce. Others acknowledged that information is being publicized, albeit not very clearly. One GS-12, Participant 65L878, who at the time of this study was in one of the agency’s centralized development programs, described his

observation as follows:

I don't think it's being advertised clearly. I come back to my office and I start speaking to people about what I'm going through in my current leadership training program and a lot of people don't know much about the program or how to get into the program or suspense date or any of the specifics of it. They see the mass emails, but they don't know the specifics of it.

Participant 89D001 shared similarly that the agency has a means for disclosing information, but the message lacks clarity. She stated the following:

Do I feel it is clearly advertised? No, at least not within my CMO. It's usually an email forwarding the tasking memo, basically saying here it is, this is being offered, and if you're interested, coordinate with the local training coordinator. The issue is not just at this level. It seems to initiate at the headquarters level.

Participant 87W595, an SES, stated, "I'm not convinced the word gets out even with all the effort we put into advertising the programs." Participant 79A648, a GS-15, honed in further, suggesting the culprit may lie within a specific location at headquarters. He stated, "If you read your emails it's clear, but I don't think enough effort has been put on it outside of the human-resource directorate who sends out all of the information on it." Here he suggests perhaps that greater effort could be placed on getting information disseminated outside of the headquarters walls. Participant 88B511, another GS-15 familiar with the process, explained it this way:

From a failure perspective, not communicating out from both an agency level down to the CMO, exactly everything that you should expect to be able to get promoted. I don't think that they do a good job. In many aspects we get taskers, leadership development being one of them, where we'll get notified, but the suspense is due in only 3 to 5 days to get it sent back up all the way through the chain, to meet the suspense. So there's not near as much opportunity or advertisement as I would like to see within the agency.

Regardless of the area in which the liability, if any, may lie, a breakdown in awareness of the available opportunities is obvious. Additionally, although information is being broadcast throughout the agency, its clarity is obscure. Participant 78G101, echoed, "I

don't think it's really that clear at all because I don't think there's a good understanding of what's available."

Tasking memos. In the previous section, an understanding of how information is transferred throughout the agency became more evident. Some information is advertised on the agency's homepage, whereas facets of the same information are advertised via emailed tasking memorandums, also known as tasking memos or just taskers. A number of participants identified these tasking memos as the main source of awareness concerning training and advancement opportunities. The following comments represent a compilation of many participants' descriptions of how they became aware of training and advancement opportunities.

Participant 85E676 stated, "The information comes from headquarters and they come out in tasking memos. I distribute it out to the supervisors and then to the entire workforce." Participant 79A648 indicated being informed "usually through an email or memo or tasker that comes down from headquarters, such as 'this course is being offered by OPM, if you're interested go to this link.'" Participant 78G101 stated the following:

Every once in a while we'll get an email. I heard about them through an email soliciting our name for approval for some of the courses. I know there are some leadership development courses out there, but I think they are few and far between.

Participant 82X092 stated, "I know that there is a once-a-year tasking memo; through tasking memos on the homepage that details all the leadership development programs available." Participant 78A644 offered the following statement:

It used to be that there was a website. They showed it on the agency homepage that said development programs. I don't even know if they are there anymore. Once I was a supervisor and completely hammered with work, I wasn't looking for anymore development."

Participant 89D001 made the following comment:

I first learned about them via emails forwarded by my CMO, which usually get generated from a tasking memo that has gone out to everyone. I do not actively look at the tasking memos myself on a regular basis, so unless it gets forwarded by our office, I might not see it.

Participant 62Q572 stated the following:

I only know about them because of taskers that come through emails. Not very clearly at all. The agency misses the mark by bringing so many taskers through the training coordinators. It kind of feels like, “Here’s your tip of the week,” kind of email. Instead of “Here’s a good opportunity.”

The researcher believed that the last two participants’ remarks were particularly significant in that employees receive so many tasking memorandums that they seldom take the time to recognize when one announcing a training opportunity becomes available. The information gets lost in the mundane. Moreover, the information flowing from headquarters to the CMOs goes through the training and internship coordinators first. Therefore, reiterating what Participant 89D001 stated, “Unless it gets forwarded by our CMO, I might not see it.” Unless the training and internship coordinator sends the email to the local workforce, it is highly unlikely anyone will know about it.

The training and internship coordinator. More employees are likely to extend their potential leadership capabilities into higher levels of the organizational structure if they are made aware of every option available to them. By communicating the right message to the right people in a clear fashion, more employees may become aware of the offerings in the centralized development program and other requirements necessary to become a senior or executive leader. A headquarters leadership-skills training manager described a brief history of how training and internship coordinators came to be. He said that, initially, the agency determined that they were needed. Therefore, the first training and internship coordinators they received were washouts from the acquisition field within the agency that could not handle the acquisition arena. They ranged from GS-9 through

GS-12. They also needed a position description.

The headquarters employee-development manager explained how it used to be that nobody really knew who the training and internship coordinators were. Training and internship coordinators could be solely training coordinators, or they could be simply internship coordinators, or they could be both at the same time. However, it is becoming more common for one person to be both a training coordinator and internship coordinator yet identified with the title of training and internship coordinator. In fact, now there is a position description that helps training and internship coordinators know what their responsibilities are. They used to be given other duties as assigned, but now they are all GS-11s, which is causing frustration among those who used to be GS-12s because the scenario causes them to get demoted or have to change their job position. For those who are GS-7s, they cannot automatically jump into a GS-11 position, so they have to change their job position. It becomes especially difficult for those GS-7s who say they really like their job as training and internship coordinators, but now they are not allowed to have that position because it requires a GS-11 to fill the position.

A headquarters learning director explained that training and internship coordinators are not yet empowered to do their job in its fullness, yet they are intended to be the training experts in the field. Both the employee-development manager and the leadership-skills training manager referred to training and internship coordinators as the agency's ambassadors. Although the concept of improving the training and internship coordinators in the field is still in its infancy, it is important that they have all the knowledge, training, and resources they need. The employee-development manager and his team are trying to get to each region more regularly to conduct an informational training course for all training and internship coordinators within that region. They are

also working to provide training and internship coordinators with informational updates on one of the agency's intranet webpages in an effort to keep training and internship coordinators from having to search through their email history for the last tasking memo in order to remember what was received.

The employee-development manager and his team used to have a conference call with all training and internship coordinators (i.e., region and CMO) once per month, but attendance began to wane mainly because the training and internship coordinators do not report directly to the leadership and development group at headquarters. They work for their local commander, who, in turn, reports to the operations group and not the leadership and development group. Therefore, if the local commander tells the training and internship coordinators they need to be doing something other than the monthly teleconference, the training and internship coordinators are more inclined to follow the direction of their local commander.

Furthermore, the leadership-skills training manager explained that, although many of the training and internship coordinators understand their position responsibilities, which requires interaction with the headquarters leadership and development group, they might have a difficult time following through with their responsibilities because they are the individuals who have to interact with people within their own CMO and not headquarters. Therefore, the training and internship coordinators do not want to appear as the bad guys to their own people. If employees have questions about training, they are encouraged to go to the training and internship coordinators at their local CMO. However, there are also regional training and internship coordinators. Therefore, if the training and internship coordinators of a CMO have a question, they can direct their questions to their regional training and internship coordinators.

Tasking memorandums are transmitted through the headquarters operations group to the training and internship coordinators. So, if the employee-development manager needs to send a tasking memo to the training and internship coordinators, then he gives the memorandum to the assistant of his leadership and development group at the front desk, who ensures it gets to the operations group. Once his assistant has the tasking memo, the employee-development manager is unfamiliar with how it gets to the operations group. When tasking memos are sent out, they will often be sent to both the training and internship coordinators and someone within the local CMO leadership. Also, the effectiveness of how well the information flows from headquarters to the CMO depends on the type of information that is being transmitted.

In other words, if headquarters sends out a tasking memorandum, personnel from the regional office can put their own spin or twist on the message. For example, if the tasking memorandum says, "Provide a primary or an alternate to attend the training," the regional office can choose instead to say, "Provide a primary and an alternate to attend the training." The employee-development manager shared how internship and advancement opportunities are not being communicated effectively. He explained that the message is being changed on its way down, suggesting it is like the rumor-mill game played in elementary school.

One of the agency's leadership-course developers stated that training information is meant to flow through the training and internship coordinators and the supervisors. However, Participant 92K021 observed, "These things might be discussed in the CMO leadership meetings, but obviously the information isn't getting out." Interestingly, the leadership-skills training manager confirmed that some training and internship coordinators will decide not to send out the tasking memos but will instead decide to

mention the information at the weekly CMO senior-leadership staff call meeting.

However, sometimes, the weekly CMO senior-leadership staff call meeting gets canceled, and the message does not get communicated to the CMO decision makers.

Consequently, the information is then either prevented or delayed from getting out to the rest of the workforce.

In 1984, Eliyahu Goldratt introduced a form of management thinking called the theory of constraints, which suggests that organizations are often hindered from reaching their goals due to at least one bottleneck or constraint within the system (Goldratt & Cox, 1984). These constraints are similar to a weak link in a chain of links. A chain can only be as strong as the weakest link. The theory helps reveal the vulnerabilities within an organization. Similar to Goldratt's theory of constraints, the training and internship coordinators are essentially at a position within the agency that they become the bottleneck of information. The leadership-skills training manager explained that a lot of information is being flowed through the training and internship coordinators, who are the passing action. They pass along the information, but some of them are deleting the information before it gets passed along to the rest of the workforce. The training and internship coordinators become either a facilitator or a barrier for continuing the effective flow of information to the employees outside of headquarters.

Refusing opportunities without knowing it. If people are not aware of what is available except through emails, which they may neither be receiving nor reading, they are likely choosing other paths to follow and essentially rejecting the agency's opportunities for advancement. Yet, from their perspective, the opportunity is invisible to them, particularly when their own supervisor is neglecting to make the employee aware of the opportunity. The employees are not even aware they are rejecting what could be an

easily accessible opportunity. Participant 62Q572 said, “I didn’t see anything on the homepage, but I also wasn’t looking for it.” This employee did not have the information to know whether the advancement opportunity was something he or she wanted.

Yet, the process of discovering information should, at least in part, be the responsibility of the federal employee, which may require a change in mindset.

Participant 88B511 stated, “You have to pursue those promotion opportunities where they are rather than expect them to come to you.” Some employees may not know to even begin thinking with this intent, unless they are first informed. Participant 92K021 eventually determined that to come to know the information she did not already know then. She stated, “It was up to me to seek out that opportunity and express the interest.” However, to know to seek out opportunities requires an ignition of a sort. For some, that ignition might be the tasking memo that causes them to inquire further, or it might come through a fellow coworker, or maybe through a supervisor who mentions and possibly mentors the employee onto the path of information of which they are in need.

The responsibility of senior leadership. As has already been shared, the training and internship coordinator is in a key position to contribute to the overall welfare of the agency’s future leaders. However, the onus is not entirely that of the training and internship coordinators to bear. A portion of the responsibility is also that of the more local (i.e., region and CMO) middle management and senior leadership teams. This also presents an unfortunate dilemma on some occasions. Because CMO senior leaders are often among the first to become aware of advancement opportunities, it becomes easier for them to take advantage of those opportunities before the information is passed along to the remainder of the workforce. Participant 63J226, an SES, shared the following:

I’ve seen and I’ve heard that sometimes a lot of these courses will come down

from the top, will come down from say headquarters and they'll trickle down and often times they'll be sucked up by people above you and they'll never get down to where you are.

However, other supervisory leaders understand that at least one of their purposes as a leader is to be a facilitator of information and a motivator of personnel. They are aware of the needs of both their present and future workforce. Therefore, in addition to their many other responsibilities, they proactively look for occasions to reach out to individuals as well as the general body of employees, to inform and encourage them regarding advancement opportunities. An example of this is of a GS-13, Participant 75G948, who describes how she became aware of available opportunities through the emails as well as her local senior leadership:

Through email through the group leader or deputy director that will say here's an opportunity for this leadership program. They encourage you to apply for it. So on different levels we get all sorts of notifications. Here they really push wanting to get you in that leadership role and help you follow your career. So every time there's an opportunity that comes down, they'll let you know and say, "Apply for it." The culture is really good here.

This employee became more informed and motivated to pursue opportunities as a result of her local senior leaders making her aware of what was available and offering encouragement. Pursuing and applying for opportunities becomes a priority for the general workforce when it is also a priority for the senior leaders. Participant 63J226 explained it this way:

One of the problems we had a few years ago was we weren't getting enough applications, number one. Number two, the applications we were getting were so subpar that I had a hard time even sending somebody. I think things changed because the word got out and I think that feedback got out. I think we sent back through the leadership, through the regions and through the CMO commanders and said, "Hey regions, hey CMO commanders, hey deputy commanders, and group leaders!" It needs to be important to them. They need to push their folks. It's not enough to just say, "Hey here's a memo!"

Tasking memorandums and webpages are good for informational purposes, but they are

not enough to contribute significantly to the overall awareness of the workforce. It is apparent that the message described by Participant 63J226, in reference to subpar application packets, made its way to the local levels. Participant 85E676 established the point:

There are times that headquarters have emphasized to make sure we provide our best qualified. If I'm a supervisor, I'm looking at your packet and I know you have not acceptably met your performance appraisal, you should not be recommended, because your supervisor provides a letter of recommendation. Then the regional commander gets involved. You want to send someone who is the future of the agency.

For regional or CMO senior leaders to feel confident in recommending a participant for leadership training and guidance, it is important for them to be more aware of ensuring their employees receive the required material for rendering informed decisions. In fact, it may not be until after the senior leader ensures their employees are receiving the facts, will an employee begin venturing out to see for him or herself the possibilities that may be obtainable. Participant 82X092, a GS-14, described how she applied what she discovered this way:

From my past involvement, I try to make sure everyone knows about it here. I don't know if people who haven't benefited from it themselves push for it, because none of my supervisors pushed me until I finally got one who had been in a similar program. It took someone who had been there to see its value and let other people know.

Thus, if senior leaders have not participated in a similar program, it could be a hindrance to potential participants. Yet, when a senior leader is familiar with the available programs and gets involved in the awareness process, the employees beneath them appear more inclined to adjust their career path upon considering the additional information they receive. Participant 88B511, a former military CMO commander for Agency X, made it a priority to enhance the message flow so his workforce could have

the information they needed to determine a best fit for their personal career paths. He shared the following relating to when he was a commander:

I would in some ways encourage some of my workforce to apply for these opportunities and encourage, recommend, or support them. I would like to have a list of people sitting on my desk that says these are the positions I'm interested in and if there's an opportunity then I want to pursue these. Normally we're going out and asking our folks if they're interested rather than having our folks come to us saying, "I understand there are these positions or opportunities or programs, I want to be considered for one. What do I need to do?" It's more of us asking for input rather than the workforce knowing so much about this stuff that they're lining up to take these opportunities.

Therefore, it can be somewhat effective when an employee has the initiative to address senior leaders and inquire for further information. However, it seems more effective when the agency's CMOs are led by proactive leaders who include it as part of their regular responsibilities to inform their employees, beyond the usual emails, regarding ways they can progress in their individual careers.

Face to face. The researcher established that a well-informed workforce aware of available career-enriching possibilities may be less likely to refuse chances for improvement. Additionally, the workforce may also be more appreciative when a training and internship coordinator ensures the flow of information remains unimpeded and the local senior leadership brings word-of-mouth attention to it. For this process to be more successful, it is recommended that leadership personally address individuals and invite them to participate. The assistant operations officer at the agency's headquarters suggested that one-on-one interaction is possibly the best way to improve communication flow within the agency.

When employee express interest in a developmental opportunity by following through on the information they receive, some form of face-to-face, one-on-one interaction with leadership may offer a higher probability for generating a successful

outcome. The following are responses shared by four research participants on this topic.

Participant 71D731 stated, “I have heard about the agency’s various programs through word-of-mouth.” Participant 92K021 reported, “If there’s an all-hands done right around the time that information comes out, then it should be discussed in an all-hands.”

Participant 62Q572 stated, “There was a little bit of word of mouth, but I would require that the team leaders identify candidates and give them very specific one-on-one attention and discuss or ask them about the opportunities.” Participant 88B511 stated, “We’re also pushing for face to face and debriefs with employees.”

Other participants offered additional clarification about how personal interaction, as either the leader or the employee, enhanced participation within the advancement process. Participant 75D725 described what he did to make sure the necessary information was brought to the attention of his workforce. He said, “As a deputy, I spend a lot of time formally mentoring people. I took a special interest in the internship program and working one on one with them and taking the opportunity to make sure they were aware of them.” Here it was important to this participant to make it a priority to identify opportunities for personal interaction.

Participant 92K021 shared appreciation as an employee toward the deputy, not the same deputy as that mentioned by Participant 75D725, for offering some time for one-on-one attention. She stated the following:

We have a good deputy here and he would follow up with me and say, “Did you get your paperwork in? Once I made my interest known, he was following up to make sure I was on track to get the application submitted and making sure the commander was doing what he needed to do in a timely manner. Once they knew I was interested, they got on board and were very helpful.

An SES, Participant 87W595, has noticed the need for more interpersonal interaction between employees and leadership at the supervisory level. At that level, supervisors can

affect the greatest influence on an employee. He suggested the following:

We need more push from lower levels and first line supervisors, not just central push from headquarters. Mostly we need to encourage supervisors to make this more personal, to talk with high performing professionals and let them know we think they are competitive for these programs and should apply.

Consequently, the hope is that greater numbers of employees will step onto the path that leads to further development and advancement. Here, Participant 87W595 also implied that, for supervisory level leaders to make a better effort at motivating those they lead, the headquarters' executive leaders need to encourage, talk with, and let them know that doing so is important to the agency. Participant 89T677, a GS-12, shared an experience she had in another DoD organization, in which she saw this process work successfully. She explained the following:

In the Air Force, I had supervisors who would bring it up in person. So if we had a casual conversation they might bring it up. If we had a mid-year appraisal, they might bring it up. It was much more of "Here's what's available. Do you want to do this kind of thing?" "Tell me what you want to do!" I don't get that in the agency.

Although some levels of leadership seem to recognize the value of word-of-mouth, face-to-face interaction, it is apparent that the research participants recognize its value. Whether some or many, there are leaders within the agency who strive to inform and personally encourage their employees to move beyond their comfort zone to try new things. In fact, one senior leader, Participant 79A648, stated it this way:

I think I found my niche. I love the day-to-day contact with people. I'm not a fan of email. If I've got an issue, I want to sit down with the person face-to-face and talk about it. I like the day-to-day contact. If there's an issue in the CMO, we can dig into it. I can sit out with the guys on the floor and recommend trying something.

When leadership is motivated to help others learn how to progress, the process of advancement improves. Furthermore, employees may consequently be more inclined to

move beyond their usual *modus operandi* and, with a clearer awareness of the process, attempt unfamiliar territory.

Improvements in awareness. A theme among participants that was mentioned often enough to affect detection was that the military successfully utilizes a process from which Agency X can pattern its own developmental initiatives. For instance, Participant 79A648 stated the following:

I would really like to see something like we do in the military. When you come out of your basic course in the military, you know what tickets you have to punch for the next 20 years if you're going to continue to be promoted. Right now, we don't have that in this agency.

The process of punching tickets is essentially a form of career mapping (Schirmer et al., 2004). Career mapping is the designation of a path that leads to the achievement of milestones and goals within the time line of one's professional career (Coyne & Chatham, 2016; Sylvain, Sean, Beth, & Barbara, 2012). Participant 75D725 explained this process as follows:

In the military, you would sit down with your mentor and they would help you map out your career and know when those opportunities are in your career to go do that stuff. I'm not sure the agency does a good job with that. They could improve there.

It is evident from participant responses that the agency can improve in the area of designating a potential path for personal advancement. However, it is also clear that the basic process of conveying information to subordinates can be particularly helpful, as shared by Participant 89T677, who stated, "When I was with the Air Force, they were much more vocal about opportunities. There was a lot more information being passed around. With the agency, I don't see that as much." Although the agency is doing many things well, it may be helpful to consider adapting processes from organizations like the military that have already demonstrated a pattern of success in the field of advancement.

Subsequent Throughput from Higher Levels

Much of the information received by the workforce comes from the senior and executive leaders at headquarters. The process for how the information is disseminated and received also comes from headquarters. However, the subsequent output from the lower level workforce indicates the input from headquarters may have a few glitches. There are some indications that barriers to advancement are being created by higher level turnover and the mindset of some employees within the workforce. When discussing the influence that senior and executive-level leaders have on the agency, Participant 78A644 explained as follows:

The way the agency has been organized and behaved, the requirement to coordinate and share information and act as a team rather than independent stovepipes has not been high on anybody's agenda. I think the general is driving toward a better idea. I hope they stay longer than 3 years because it will take longer than that to straighten us out.

Participant 63J226 sanctioned that the general seems to be having an overall positive impetus on Agency X employees. When describing opportunities for improvement, he state the following:

I do know that the senior leadership really emphasized pushing all these opportunities down to the very lowest level in the organization because those are the folks we have to reach because it's the folks at the junior levels that really need the most training.

Although there may be improvements on the horizon, there are concerns among employees that things will not really change or improve. The employees refer to experiences they have had in which the current leader shares a new initiative, but then that leader's tenure concludes after a few short years and any changes they tried to make do not endure. This could be good or bad, depending on an employee's perspective of that leader's initiatives. Participant 92K021 shared one of her experiences, saying, "There

was a big push from management participation who thought it was great and then a new set of management comes in and they didn't think it was so great. So it went by the wayside. Some of it was due to management turnover."

Hence, new leaders are appointed, attempt to establish themselves as a notable leader by initiating impressive improvements during their brief tenure, and then they leave. This process of leadership turnover can have somewhat of a destabilizing effect on workforce guidance and direction. At the CMO senior-leadership level, the shortcoming of frequent leadership turnover is also evident. Participant 85E676 exclaimed her frustration this way:

That's one of the major things I see within the agency because we have a high turnover rate of how many years a command stays in place. So once somebody turns around you have a new commander coming in trying to know the workforce. So you will never know all your employees' capacity and development or what they have to become a leader and to push them forward because they're not in there long enough or there are those who have been in there too long. When people are in a position for too long, they become stagnant. The changes are supposed to go through, but they stop the changes from getting through them to be implemented as they are meant to be implemented.

Here, Participant 85E676 emphasized that turnover can be either good or bad, depending on one's perspective. This participant also described how leaders can keep methods for improvement from getting through the processes. For example, if the workforce viewed one leader favorably and that leader attempted to implement satisfactory initiatives, those improvements could be stalled immediately once the next leader is in place. However, some employees may be able to enhance stability among the workforce. The training manager for leadership skills offers a recommendation, particularly in reference to the flow of communication through training and internship coordinators.

The leadership-skills training manager shared the understanding that the CMO

deputy director is the constant face in the CMO and not the director. The director changes out every 3 years, so employees essentially hold their breath until the director's tenure is finished. However, the deputy has no set tenure and could, therefore, remain for many years. The leadership-skills training manager said he expects the deputies to let their workforce know that they need to follow the training and internship coordinators and that the information the training and internship coordinators send out or say is as though it is coming from the deputy with a comment such as, "She is my direct representative."

It seems much of the reason for interference with regard to both lasting improvements through leadership turnover and the improved flow of information may be the result of individual's regard for ego, as was discussed in the previous sections. The financial and business executive director at the agency's headquarters explained that some information may get stuck in supervisors' email inboxes, partly for selfish reasons. One of the reasons is that, if the high-performing employees learn about and get accepted to participate in a long-term leadership development assignment, it could affect the productivity of the remaining workforce while they are away.

However, the leadership-skills training manager countered that, if leaders are not allowing their employees to advance, it is more than just being selfish; it is being negligent. He emphasized the overall need to put the agency first before self. He shared that Agency X is a results-oriented agency. Essentially, he explained that, currently, the culture is such that there is less focus on how a result is accomplished and more focus on just seeing that it gets accomplished. In other words, he is suggesting that some supervisors are behaving as though they cannot let their employee go to training because they need them close in order to get results.

Alignment with Policy

Getting at the roots. One of the final aspects of the study involved determining the extent to which the employees' perceptions of opportunities for advancement align with policy. This is done in an attempt to understand where the agency gets its guidance for fostering advancement opportunities. As was shared in Chapter 2, the foundations of any lasting institution are usually grounded on a certain purpose. That purpose becomes the root from which the life of that organization is nourished and sustained. Yet, in the research of Agency X, the researcher could find no clear injunction on the subject of development or advancement that seamlessly tied into some root or core purpose, beginning with the agency's tasking memorandums and working backward.

The initial purpose for which the agency was created. When asked what the initial purpose was for which the agency was established, the overwhelming majority of participants said it was "to be the eyes and ears" for the "government," "customer," "warfighter," "contracting officers," or "DoD." Employees of the agency are very familiar with their purpose as an independent entity for ensuring the taxpayer gets what they pay for within cost and that the warfighter gets what is needed within schedule. Moreover, nearly all participants declared that the initial purpose for the agency's creation remains today.

Making connections. The researcher attempted to find a connection between the practice of development and advancement of employees to some form of fundamental documentation within the agency that either mandated or at least offered guidance toward the need for such a practice. As many of the participants noted, they receive emails as tasking memorandums that offer guidance from headquarters to the workforce. These tasking memos can be either directly or indirectly connected to the agency's strategic

plan, depending on the requirements of the tasking memo. The agency's strategic plan, which was recently revamped, is made up of various initiatives intended to provide strategic direction for the future of the agency. For tasking memos related to developmental opportunities, they are usually directly correlated with an initiative within the strategic plan.

One of the agency's directorates that have responsibility over some portions of the plan is the human-capital executive directorate. Within this directorate, there are at least seven different divisions, each with its own required function. One of these seven divisions is the strategic learning division, whose mission is to enhance the current and future performance of the enterprise's total workforce through provision of relevant and effectual learning and development programs and services. This division oversees the future growth and development of the agency's employees. It also has responsibility for a portion of the directorate's initiatives.

A case for policy. While attempting to determine if there was a connection from the emailed tasking memos to the strategic plan's initiatives to the agency's policy, the researcher learned that, at least for workforce development, the initiatives are based on a formal agency instruction number and not a direct policy. However, the researcher found that policies and formal instructions can sometimes be referred to as being synonymous. When participants were asked what effect they think policy may have on the agency's ability to implement development opportunities, many stated either that there is no connection or that they are unaware of a connection with policy.

For example, Participant 62Q572 stated, "I don't see a connection between policy and the ability to bring up leaders." Participant 65L878 reported, "I'm not real sure that the policy does affect it." Participant 75D725 said, "I don't think a lot really." Participant

82X092 stated, “I honestly don’t know.” Participant 78G101 reported, “I don’t know of any policy out there.” Participant 92K021 said, “Probably a lot, but exactly what those policies are, I don’t know what they are.” Finally, Participant 85E676 stated, “Policies are broken.”

Other participants had mixed views on whether policy helps or hinders employee progression, although they feel it is likely to have a positive effect. Participant 63J226 shared, “I don’t think our policy inhibits it whatsoever.” Participant 61U063 also reported, “It could have a positive effect on the agency’s ability to implement leadership development opportunities for employees who want to enhance their career.” Participant 71D731 offered the following comment:

I believe that policy can have both a negative and positive affect on the agency’s ability to implement leadership development opportunities. I believe that while policy can help facilitate and promote these opportunities, I also believe that some policy can place an unnecessary amount of restrictions on leaders that can make it difficult for them to effectively implement leadership development programs.

Therefore, policy may facilitate or it may impede the process for employee development and advancement. A general understanding of the affect policy can have on the agency and its strategic path forward is apparent through additional participants’ comments. For example, Participant 89T677 stated, “I think our policy affects everything we do.” Participant 88B511 reported, “I think it has a big effect. I think if policy is written correctly and is focused on the right areas, it will slowly change the culture.” Participant 85U352 said, “Without policy nothing is going to happen.”

However, a clear description of what that policy is, what it is tied to, or where it comes from remained unclear. Participant 81S777 offered, “I think it has a great effect flowing down from DoD.” So, a connection to the agency’s policy is located somewhere further up in the DoD. This statement is supported with a comment by Participant

85E676, who suggested, “The employees at the bottom are not understanding the meaning of the policy that is coming from those higher up or the change it is making.”

Therefore, on one end of the spectrum, there is a bottom, and, on the other end, there is a higher up, in which policy interactions occur. The location and clear understanding of this policy remains elusive, as demonstrated by one participant’s request to know more. Participant 75G948 indicated wanting to be able to know where the policy is and how to read the policy. Thus, there does not seem to be a clear understanding of the connection between policy and developmental opportunities that lead to advancement (i.e., what the policy is, where it is located, or how it relates to the agency’s general purpose).

There were assertions of various potential higher level sources from which the agency’s policy is based. Participant 63J226 claimed it comes from the better buying power initiatives of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics. The headquarters’ leadership and development group also references acquisition, technology, and logistics but added the DoD 5000, which is a series of directives and references for DoD agencies involved in the acquisition-lifecycle process. The headquarters’ employee policy director explained that an even higher level resource from which guidance is received comes from the code of federal regulations and the U.S. Code.

The code of federal regulations is “the codification of the general and permanent rules published in the Federal Register by the departments and agencies of the federal government. It is divided into 50 titles that represent broad areas subject to Federal regulation” (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015, p. 1). The U.S. Code is a consolidation and codification by subject matter of the general and permanent laws of the United States. It is prepared by the Office of the Law Revision Counsel of the United

States House of Representatives (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2015).

Additionally, the employee policy director mentioned that, before policy from any directorate within the agency can be approved, it must first be vetted through the agency's corporate support directorate, which oversees all agency policy. This directorate manages policy flowing into the agency from higher level outside entities, as well as policy internal to the agency.

The corporate support directorate directors confirmed that a viable source for the agency's policy comes from the code of federal regulations and U.S. Code. These directors shared that, ultimately, guidance and requirements originate from the Constitution of the United States, and from there to Congress, and from there to various sources from which policy mandates come and not just from the code of federal regulations or U.S. Code. They explained that policy starts broad, is then fine-tuned, and becomes more specific as it approaches the agency levels from higher above; policy requirements come from above, and additional guidance and improvement come at the lower levels.

Upon further investigation, the researcher discovered that, at the level of the DoD, there is a specific DoD Directive:

A broad policy document containing what is required by legislation, the President, or the Secretary of Defense to initiate, govern, or regulate actions or conduct by the DoD Components within their specific areas of responsibilities. DoD Directives establish or describe policy, programs, and organizations; define missions; provide authority; and assign responsibilities. (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2015)

Within this directive is guidance regulated specifically for Agency X. The guidance delegates certain authorities to the agency's director in order to fulfill the purpose and mission of the agency. Within this directive are broad references that may or may not be

interpreted as guidance for development or advancement practices within the agency. For instance, the directive states the agency director shall accomplish the following:

Develop policies, plans, and procedures; develop resource requirements; Establish and resource sufficient positions to support requirements for agency personnel to deploy into a theater of operations and to ensure these personnel are properly trained and prepared. Design and manage agency programs and activities to improve standards of performance, economy, and efficiency and demonstrate agency's attention to the requirements of its organizational customers, both internal and external to the DoD, consistent with the requirements of the Secretary of Defense Biennial Review of Defense Agencies and DoD Field Activities. (DCMA, 2012, p. 3)

At the agency level, Agency X has issued a change in policy with regard to accepting workload in accordance with the agency's purpose and mission within the DoD. Within this policy, or instruction, it states that the agency commits "to provide skilled and experienced support management personnel and senior leadership commensurate with its responsibilities as a combat support agency" (DCMA, 2014d, p. 1). The agency then has the option of turning to the OPM for guidance on how to provide and properly train skilled personnel with the goal of fulfilling the purpose and mission of the agency.

The researcher attempted to use input from participants and field notes to offer a potential connection that might support areas in which Agency X receives objectives and direction for enabling employee progression along the path to elevated organizational levels. Although there does appear to be a flow of connected guidance that begins at the suggested high-level core of all guidance, the Constitution of the United States, which then flows down to the lower levels of Agency X, the policy linkages that regulate employee development remain uncertain.

Summary

These findings indicate a few constructs that organizational leaders might

consider when determining potential improvements for enabling employees to qualify for developmental opportunities. The first construct involves that of awareness. Agency X has developmental programs in place, but employees are either not aware of them or do not understand the application process. Additionally, a very important responsibility of training coordinators is to be information facilitators. However, the process currently in use for them to facilitate information is lacking in effectiveness. The second construct that offers employees the potential to either qualify for or refuse an opportunity to progress within their career is the fact that an opportunity to advance may not be worth it in the long run. Whether it is financial, family, or location, some employees may choose not to advance because ultimately the terminal value is not worth it to them.

A third construct is that of employees and leaders giving a greater priority to themselves rather than the overall betterment of the organization or fellow coworkers. The issue is particularly poignant among leaders who are unwilling to permit the flow of information to reach those at lower levels. They are more interested in getting successful results in the present rather than making current sacrifices for greater opportunities later. Each of these constructs offer instances in which employees may reject or refuse an opportunity to advance, which is an opportunity that could give them the additional knowledge and skills needed to ultimately progress into senior or executive-level positions.

Perceptions of policy and its alignment with agency requirements for developing employees indicated an obscure link with regard to guidance for current agency leaders and strategy developers. There seems to be a vague understanding of where employee development fits into the agency's strategic mission. Connections beyond the agency, however, appear to be even more ambiguous, although there were a few referenced

documents that could provide potential purposeful links. Overall, the research provided an indication of the potential constructs that define the process to determining causality.

Causality will offer insight into determining the root cause of the phenomenon.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze potential reasons for gaps in executive leadership advancement within a DoD agency. The study was designed to examine the phenomenon of interest regarding employees' refusal to advance into executive-level vacancies within the federal government and to combine the concepts of position qualification and position refusal into a reliable theory. Although there are gaps or vacancies at the higher levels of leadership at the agency levels of the federal government, the number of proposed gaps does not seem as prevalent as the literature claimed. The researcher believes that much of the initial scare was due to the number of baby boomers capable of retiring. The emergence of gaps, however, will likely still occur but is being deferred due to delayed retirements.

In Agency X, it has become clear that all vacancies are filled, and they have been for some time, which may be contributing to stagnation among the lower levels. Additionally, it is possible that the agency has too many SESs at the helm, again adding to the ascendancy dilemma. What is clear, however, is the fact that fewer employees feel inclined to progress into the executive ranks for reasons described in previous chapters. The number of people moving toward or vying for those positions in some fields has slowed. Those who feel inclined to continue to progress are facing greater obstacles toward reaching the organizational summit. There are people who remain ready and willing to fill the next vacancy, should it become available, but the competition, though vigorous, has fewer contenders.

Overview of the Study

It was reported that inordinate numbers of federal workers at the agency level

were not progressing along the path to becoming senior executive leaders. Accounts signaled at what appeared to be a lack of personal employee desire to progress into federal jobs (Neal, 2014; Thompson, 2000) and, by default, federal executive-level employment (Katz, 2014). Evidence highlighting the issue became more apparent in the 2009 study by the Senior Executives Association, which focused on federal government deficiencies in attracting the next generation of federal leaders. The literature highlighted potential reasons. One of the main reasons was the result of employment gaps or vacancies becoming available due to an impending wave of baby-boomer retirements.

Another reason was due to generational difference, with advancement not being a desirable priority of the the rising generation in the workforce. Yet another was the potential result of economic stagnation, with some senior executive staff choosing to delay retirement, making it more difficult for lower level employees to ascend into higher levels. Therefore, in an effort to gain additional insight with the hope of uncovering a compelling phenomenon that pointed to a relationship between an organization's capabilities, employees' abilities to qualify for advanced positions, and whether the employees were refusing those positions, a large independent DoD agency, called Agency X, became the subject of the study.

An inductive qualitative study was conducted to determine why gaps in executive level positions were not being filled as expected. The general approach to the study was to combine the ideas of position qualification and position refusal into a reliable theory by delving deeper into the causality of the phenomenon. Expanding upon previous observations and correlations, a systematic grounded-theory design was used to conduct this research through the use of memos, coding techniques, categorical analysis, and comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The principal reason was to generate new theoretical constructs rather than conducting research by repeatedly testing old theories (Birks & Mills, 2011) or being bogged down by the constraints of existing grand theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A systematic design was used for verification purposes (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013) which included the use of a three-stage coding method (i.e., open, axial, and selective). One of the primary steps in developing theory involves identifying correlations between categories (Creswell, 2008; Goertz, 2003). However, contrasting and correlating data are only part of the solution (Ziliak & McCloskey, 2008) to developing good theory.

At the heart of theory development is the establishment of causality or of determining the causal mechanism that links inputs and outputs (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015). After phenomena are observed and measured, it is important to understand the processes involved and the movement of the phenomena over time (Christensen & Sundahl, 2015). To do this, constructs are developed. By identifying the constructs and understanding the processes involved, the causal condition becomes more recognizable (Charmaz, 2006; Goodman et al., 2011), prompting the ability to explore further into the essence of the problem. The theory can then be categorized and applied to various circumstances (Von Bertalanffy, 1950).

Purposeful sampling was used to be able to gain maximum variation of participants within the research setting. The study consisted of one-on-one interviews in an explanatory research design (Creswell, 2008) that utilized qualitative data to provide a clearer picture of the causality and explanations of the phenomena (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013). In addition to the data gathered from the initial research, the study's design allowed for data triangulation, in which open-ended interview questions at each level of the organizational structure helped to corroborate the findings of preliminary

information. Through personal dialogue, the participants' individual interpretations helped to fine-tune the theoretical themes. Additionally, as part of the interviewing process, field notes and memos were kept in a notebook and used for writing informal thoughts, perceptions, and emerging patterns (Glesne, 2006).

Summary of the Findings

The findings from the study indicate a few constructs that organizational leaders might consider when determining potential improvements for enabling employees to qualify for developmental opportunities. The first construct involves that of awareness. Agency X has developmental programs in place, but employees are either not aware of them or do not understand the application process. An important responsibility of training coordinators involves being information facilitators, yet the information facilitation process currently in use is lacking in effectiveness. Whether it is financial, family, or location, some employees may choose not to advance because ultimately the terminal value is not worth it to them, which is the second construct.

A third construct is that of employees and leaders having a disproportionate regard for themselves rather than for the future progress of the organization. The issue is particularly poignant among leaders unwilling to permit the flow of information to reach lower levels. Their focus may be more on attaining current gains rather than seeing to the long-term needs of the organization. Each of these constructs offer instances in which employees may reject or refuse an opportunity to advance, which is an opportunity that could give them the additional knowledge and skills needed to ultimately progress into senior or executive level positions.

A study of policy and its alignment with agency requirements intended for the development of employees indicates an obscure link that could potentially guide current

agency leaders and strategy developers. There seems to be a vague understanding of where employee development fits into the agency's strategic mission. Sources of information linking the agency's policy for employee development and advancement to something outside of the organization appear to be even more ambiguous, although there were a few referenced documents that could provide potential purposeful links. Overall, the research provided an indication of the potential constructs that define the process to determining causality. The causal mechanism offers insight toward establishing the root cause of the phenomenon.

Causal Mechanism

A review of the constructs, shared in Chapter 4, that define the process to determining causality offers insight into the potential primary reason for the ambiguity that masks the path to ascendancy, prompting perfectly qualified employees to reject opportunities for advancement. Why is it that employees do not progress, or refuse to progress, into executive-level positions? There may be many reasons this occurs, but, for purposes of simplification, only the three identified in Chapter 4 will be discussed as potential constructs. They are awareness, terminal value, and self-regarding.

Awareness. A general description of awareness means to cognitively know and understand a lot about something, which can occur through various formats of communicative means (Rothwell et al., 2010). With more awareness, employees are more likely to follow through with advancement opportunities (Burke, 2002). An Agency X headquarters safety manager stated that employees "need to understand who, what, when, where, why, and how" in order to clearly understand safety and remain safe. In the case of advancement, it seems the message of either who, what, when, where, why, or how to advance into executive positions is not reaching the employees.

There may not be enough awareness generated for employees to advance, meaning that the agency is not communicating the message either clearly enough, deeply enough, or frequently enough into the employees' senses to generate enough interest to answer the questions needed to advance into executive positions. As such, the employees do not clearly understand what is required to advance or how the advancement program applies to them. Examples of this lack of awareness of advancement opportunities came from participant comments.

Participant 78G101 said, "I don't think it's really that clear at all because I don't think there's a good understanding of what's available." Participant 92K021 observed, "These things might be discussed in leadership meetings, but obviously the information isn't getting out." Additionally, the agency's leadership-skills training manager explained that a lot of information flows through the training coordinators, who are the passing action. They pass along training information, but some of them are deleting the information before it is passed along to the rest of the workforce. A partial remedy for this awareness deficiency could be to encourage, or even require, more face-to-face communication regarding pertinent topics. Another remedy would be to resolve the bottleneck to communication flow at the training-coordinator level. With awareness in both directions, up to down and down to up, the organization chain could be improved.

Terminal value. Terminal value is the value of something at the end of a specified future valuation date. It is also the end state that is considered desirable and worth working toward. Ledford, Gerhart, and Fang (2013) offered a list of common personal terminal values people often strive to achieve, such as family security, happiness, a comfortable life, or social recognition. However, in the case of qualifying for a position or refusing a position opportunity in Agency X, it may be that to those who

are a part of the position process, particularly the employee, the terminal value is negative.

It is negative in the context of executive leadership opportunities because the employee's perspective is such that the terminal value consists of unpleasant results (Ledford et al., 2013). In other words, why should employees go to all the trouble, according to their understanding, of getting to a career position in which they end up doing things they dislike doing? The terminal value is what makes the whole idea of advancing into a culminating executive position not plausible for them (Wood, 2008). The employees may not want to start on the advancement path because there is nothing to convince them that the reward at the end of the path is worth the sacrifice.

The terminal value can be a motivating force on a person to cause the individual to want to change or to improve (Wood, 2008). However, the current terminal value offered may not be enough for employees to alter what is important in their lives (Gneezy, Meier, & Rey-Biel, 2011), meaning that, for some, the things that are important to them cannot be found in the executive suite (Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014). Advancement into executive positions may not occur for employees because of their definition of success; there are things in their lives that are more important than success at work. For example, some would-be executives may refuse to advance because they would have to uproot and move their family, but there is currently not enough incentive to do so (e.g., pay, status, benefits, training, awards). Participant 82X092 highlighted this by stating, "Some could advance quickly, but they want to wait until their children are older, so they don't apply for the next higher level because they're waiting." Participant 75D725 confirmed the sentiment by adding, "There's a personal side to it. Some people have outside commitments that may be due to family demands or kids."

Additionally, some feel the incentives are not enough for the responsibility required to fulfill higher level positions. In other words, they may prefer to maintain their current lifestyle, doing less for less pay, than having to fulfill heavier responsibilities for pay that is not significantly different from their present salary. Some participants felt that, because they are at the latter end of their careers, they would not be willing to pursue growth opportunities. For example, Participant 79A648, a GS-15, stated, “I’m not sure if at my age that I would even enjoy being a SES. My pay level is already higher than most of the SESs. I’d gotten to the point in my life where the quality of life was worth more to me than the ego boost of being an SES.”

Participant 87W595, an SES, reported, “There is a lack of financial incentives to move into the spotlight. There really is no financial or other benefits or incentives. In fact, for many, leaving the GS system for SES is a pay and benefits cut believe it or not.” Participant 62Q572, a GS-12, confirmed this sentiment by stating, regarding the subject of financial restriction, “The money doesn’t go up enough to take on that next level of responsibility; it’s not worth it.” Participant 88B511 asked this reflective question, representative of other potentially qualified leaders: “So, what’s my incentive for taking on additional responsibility, because I’m really not going to get compensated for that?” Participant 75G948 offered, “It’s a lot of responsibility. Some people don’t want the responsibility or the headaches.

Participant 78A644 added, “So they ask themselves, ‘Is it worth their health?’ Some people think, well, I’m going to put in for it anyway, it can’t be that bad. Then they get in and realize it really is that bad.” Participant 85U352 shared, “They don’t want the frustration.” A follow-up to this is offered by Participant 78G101, a GS-13, as one who is even one step closer to a senior-level position. He admits that the issue of taking on

additional responsibility could be a genuine deterrent for some. He said, “Just the stress level, the more expectations, the more responsibility that you will have. The higher the executive level, the more people you’re dealing with, which comes with a whole handful of things.”

Self-regarding. Self-regarding refers to people (e.g., leaders, employees) wanting the reward of personal gain without the required long-term effort (Ramakrishnan, 2008). There is a tendency for employees to want the reward of the executive suite without having to undertake the required long-term effort to get there. In Agency X, there are perceptions that an old mindset still exists that are due to employees, “thinking they’re going to advance by just doing what they’ve always done” (Participant 75D725). An interesting follow-on to this comment is offered by a financial and business executive director at the agency’s headquarters who shares that there are some who may think they are due or simply that it is their turn for a promotion because they have been in a position for a certain period of time. Similarly, Participant 88B511 shared, “Many times, I think the workforce has the idea that if I stay where I am long enough and do a good enough job, those developmental programs or opportunities for promotion will come to me.”

In addition, chief executive officers generally tend to remain in their position for anywhere from 2 to 5 years (Brown, 2005; Pellet, 2009; Thompson, 2006), with an optimal suggested tenure of 4.8 years (Luo, Kanuri, & Andrews, 2013). For Agency X, the executive director, equivalent to the chief executive officer, has been in this position for 3 to 5 years (Workman, 2014b). Over the course of many of the participants’ tenures, they have seen multiple executive directors come and go. Yet, many participants were forthright in their opinions with respect to how they feel senior and executive leaders continue to view advancement opportunities for employees at the lower levels. For

example, Participant 89D001 stated the following:

Honestly, I really don't think our agency leaders really care at all about the professional development of those under them at all any more. In the past 10 years or so, from my viewpoint, most leaders are out for themselves, and the only reason why they may appear to be interested in your development and advancement is because they have to get that box checked off.

Other participants spoke similarly. Participant 81S777 stated, "I don't think they are interested at all." Participant 78A644 said, "I can't say that I think they are at all right now." Participant 92K021 shared, "I honestly feel there isn't interest in my personal development." Although Participant 75D725, a GS-15, tended to view the present scenario similarly, he delved a little deeper and explained why agency executives might not appear as interested in lower level employees' advancement opportunities. He stated the following:

I don't think there's really a senior leader out there that really cares about my professional development. At this level, you could perhaps be viewed as a threat to them. If I'm seeking a promotion opportunity, it probably is after one of those senior positions in the organization.

The next step for a GS-15 to make in the advancement hierarchy is to become an executive, which could potentially mean competition for a current executive's position.

It could be a supervisor's self-interest and desire to keep the top performers in the workplace that ultimately inhibits the leadership growth of the agency. Participant 75D725, a senior CMO supervisor, said, "Typically, your highest performers are not ones that you're going to want to let go away to school. Let your lower performers attend because you're not as reliant upon them." Essentially, the employee's senior leader becomes the one refusing the opportunity for the employees by refusing to let them attend.

The financial and business executive director at the agency's headquarters added

that information on advancement opportunities might get passed along, partly for selfish reasons. One of those included that, if their high-performing employees learn about and get accepted to participate in a long-term leadership development assignment, it could affect the productivity of the remaining workforce while they are away. Participant 63J226, an SES, confirmed this action is occurring when he shared the following:

I've seen and I've heard that sometimes a lot of these courses will come down from the top, will come down from say headquarters and they'll trickle down and often times they'll be sucked up by people above you and they'll never get down to where you are.

The agency's leadership-skills training manager declared that if leaders are not allowing their employees to advance, it is more than just being selfish, it is being negligent.

Historically, leaders from organizations in similar cases (Kouzes & Posner, 2011) are inclined to enact policies that, intentional or not, make the current leaders look good while they are in office (Niemi & Dyck, 2014). The tendency is to enact guidance and policy that affords mostly short-term gains, delivering visually appealing results within the timeframe of their leadership tenure at the organization. It is this regard for self that a short-term, rather than a long-term, view for the greater good of the organization is used, which is somewhat like trying to do "subtraction in the hope of accomplishing addition" (Herzberg, 1986, p. 8).

On the other hand, if a leader is actually more concerned with supporting those at lower levels by helping them work their way up through developmental opportunities, instead of making themselves look good, the entire dynamic of the work environment changes for the better. Yet, if the current leader is less concerned with the long-term health of the organization or its people, then it may become more difficult for beneficial sustainable policy to be implemented (Klitgaard & Light, 2005). In Agency X's case,

even when lower level senior leaders remain on staff after the executive director leaves office, they are limited in their ability to effectively sustain policy before the next new director proposes changing it, which can be good if the original policy produced cankerous results.

Policy. As was shared in Chapter 2, the foundations of any lasting institution are usually grounded on a certain purpose. That purpose becomes the root from which the life of that organization is nourished and sustained. However, in studying Agency X, the researcher could find no clear injunction on the subject of development or advancement that seamlessly tied into some root or core purpose, beginning with the agency's tasking memorandums and working backward. The researcher attempted to find a connection between the practice of development and advancement of employees to some form of fundamental documentation within the agency that either mandated or at least offered guidance toward the need for such a practice.

When participants were asked what effect they think policy may have on the agency's ability to implement development opportunities, many stated either that there is no connection or that they are unaware of a connection with policy. Other participants had mixed views on whether policy helps or hinders employee progression though they feel it is likely to have a positive effect. A general understanding of the effect that policy can have on the agency and its strategic path forward was apparent through participant comments. For example, Participant 89T677 stated, "I think our policy affects everything we do." Participant 88B511 reported, "I think it has a big effect. I think if policy is written correctly and is focused on the right areas, it will slowly change the culture." Participant 85U352 said, "Without policy nothing is going to happen."

However, a clear description of what that policy is, what it is tied to, where it is

located, or where it comes from is unclear. Participant 75G948 indicating wanting to know where the policy is and how to read the policy. There does not seem to be a clear understanding of the connection between policy and developmental opportunities that lead to advancement (i.e., what the policy is, where it is located, or how it relates to the agency's general purpose).

Agency X policy directors at headquarters shared that guidance and requirements ultimately originate from the Constitution of the United States, and from there to Congress, and from there to various sources that mandate multiple divisions of policy. Policy starts broadly, is then fine-tuned, and becomes more specific as it approaches the agency levels from higher above. If a flow of connected guidance exists between the lower levels of Agency X and the suggested high-level core of all guidance, the Constitution of the United States, then policy linkages meant to regulate employee development remain unclear.

The mask of ambiguity. In the case of Agency X, the cause of the problem may be that there is a lack of alignment with the agency's root source, possibly through its policy, because the source is masked in ambiguity. What is meant by a root source? The root source is the initial purpose for which an entity was created. The entity could be a nation, industry, company, group, or individual. Following its creation, foundational guidance is developed. In today's organizations, this guidance is akin to the U.S. Constitution, 10 Commandments, Magna Carta, Declaration of Independence, or some other founding creed or sacred text (Ardley & Voase, 2013; Ben-Bassat & Dahan, 2008; Hirschl, 2010; Maier, 2012; Pettys, 2008) singular to the organization. It is the simple core doctrine (Fried, 1994; Nourse, 1997; Ulmer, 1987) that drills down to the very center of why an organization exists.

The root source is something more initial, deep, fundamental (Johnson, Rosen, & Levy, 2008), unchangeable, secure, and immovable than the organization's vision statement, mission statement, or core values (Bartkus & Glassman, 2008; Collins & Porras, 1996). Agency X's vision, mission, and core values have changed over time, but a root source does not change. The root source allows for alignment, interdependence, and interconnections in the system (Meadows, 2008; Richards, 2011) and is at the core of every decision and definition that branches out of it (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). All other things (e.g., the constructs, mission, vision, values, priorities, processes), are only appendages to it (Oaks, 2000). Like Polaris for sailors, the root source is universally constant.

Therefore, it appears the root source for Agency X may not be clearly linked to the agency's core requirements or policy, which, in turn, can affect employees' awareness, terminal value, and how they regard themselves and others. The source may not be known, not clearly articulated nor defined, or the right searching questions are not being asked in an effort to determine and define what it is. Therefore, the root source and its resultant strategic linkages remain hidden behind a mask of ambiguity, which causes misalignment of purpose between the employee and the source.

For Agency X, the established rules or policy that is in place may be inhibiting future executives' progression. Legally, the agency is bound to react to policy, guidance, and direction from higher levels. Senior and executive leaders do not necessarily make intentional poor decisions, but they make decisions based on laws or sources that have produced results they are used to. Their decisions are based on rules that have produced certain kinds of SES, or rules that were successful for a long time. Now things have changed or have the opportunity to change because, as the research indicates, potential

future executives are refusing to play by the current established rules of engagement for advancement. They are instead choosing to follow some other direction or diversion that will allow them to achieve what they want, possibly because or as a result of their current level of awareness, their perception of the terminal value, or their regard for self and others.

Employees could depend on the agency to help them align with the root source to achieve what they want, but they could just as easily follow some other direction or diversion (e.g., agency, company, job position, or hobby) to help them achieve what they want (Christensen, Anthony, Berstell, & Nitterhouse, 2007), which is what may be happening. Members of the agency want clear, concise, timely, and regular communication that addresses their questions of interest (i.e., who, what, when, where, why, how), as well as questions they are not even aware to ask about advancement. They want to be sufficiently incentivized physically, mentally, and emotionally (Imtiaz & Ahmad, 2009), and they want to look, feel, and be accepted as successful (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Hall, Lee, Kossek, & Heras, 2012), as identified from the Chapter 4 findings.

Conceptual Model

In an attempt to engender a greater understanding of the input received from participants, the researcher determined to further demonstrate the context of what the participants remarks may be suggesting (i.e., what an employee wants). From the participants' feedback, the researcher obtained the three constructs of awareness, terminal value, and self-regarding. These, in conjunction with the capabilities (i.e., resources, processes, priorities) from the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, can help to peer deeper beneath the metaphorical surface. Restructuring program curriculum so that the

organization's capabilities are based on a clearly defined mutual root source may help employees to align what they want clearly with both the processes and priorities. Then, regardless of generational shifts or other changes in the workforce, a sense of constancy is more likely to be attained, as indicated in the conceptual model found in Appendix E.

Together, the capabilities become the strategic structure of the enterprise. If an organization struggles to successfully implement and maintain strategic initiatives, it is usually because it is missing one of these critical capabilities (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). Therefore, as organizations strategically take a good, long, deep look at their internal capabilities, they are less likely to falter. When determining what resources are needed and how they should be utilized, it is important to consider the long-term needs of the organization rather than solely the short-term needs (Johnson & Luecke, 2006).

In the context of this study, the current process is that of position advancement or lack of it. If organizational leaders understand what needs to happen to build and retain leaders, then they will "design a process that continually builds leadership that gets results" (Goleman et al., 2004, p. 233). Yet, some government organizations may lack the necessary independence because their policies and processes are tied to higher level strategies that come from higher level departments (Bruff, 2009; Foote, 1988).

Organizational priorities are the structural context and "strategic needs subject to top management control, which are the principal influences on the processes of definition, impetus, and business planning" (Bower, 1986, p. 294).

They are the goals and activities that are of greatest worth to people and organizations (Covey, 2013). If a goal cannot be prioritized, it will fail (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). People and organizations fail to "organize and execute around balanced priorities because their priorities have not become deeply planted in their hearts and

minds” (Covey, 2013, p. 166), particularly those at the executive level (Goleman et al., 2004). The executive level is the primary determinant of focused priorities, so, if priorities change even a slight degree, then the primary areas of focus throughout the various management levels will also change (Bower, 1986).

Therefore, if employees are not progressing, then it may be that the processes and priorities of the organization are not helping employees align with the root source to achieve what they want. Perhaps the employees think they are on a sure path to executive level success, yet the agency’s own policies, processes, and priorities are causing the employees to divert to other paths that are far away from where they really want to be. If there is a mismatch between what an employee wants and the organization’s priorities, then the agency’s leaders and policy makers need to determine what priorities are amiss. If what an employee wants and the organization’s priorities are aligned, but there are still obstacles to the flow of employee advancement, then the process is broken (Christensen et al., 2007; Christensen & Kaufman, 2008).

If the root source has not been clearly determined, aligned, and linked with the agency’s developmental requirements, then ambiguity is inevitable. However, if the root source is clearly determined but ambiguity remains, then the root source is not being defined or articulated clearly or the organization is not asking the right searching questions. If the right searching questions are continually being asked, however, then alignment with the root source will become clearer. Once the root source is determined, the requirements will be easier to define and articulate, thereby creating alignment between the root source and the employee’s purpose, which involves the organization’s capabilities and the fulfillment of what the employee really wants (i.e. awareness, positive terminal value, regard for self). Organizations should then be more capable of

assisting employees along the path leading to the executive suite.

Recommendations for Agency X

Insight has been offered into the paradox of the lack of progression into executive level positions. An understanding of how members of the workforce are to attain executive status continues to elude lower level employees. A clearly defined and communicated definition or policy may be required to clarify the path to the executive suite. In the study, the researcher also found that Agency X is reacting more to the needs of their higher level stakeholders (i.e., DoD) than the lower level employees (i.e., the internal employees, worker bees with advancement potential). Agency X has the opportunity to provide advancement-specific training that may initially have fewer applicants when compared with OPM but that can effectively exceed training requirements when compared to similar agencies.

Agency X is in a position to be able to focus on the least productive employees: the employees who are satisfied with where they are, who are just getting by, and are not willing to put forth the effort required for advancement. Once the purpose for training and advancement becomes internalized (i.e., mentally, emotionally) within the segment of lower achieving employees, the agency can then focus on perfecting the results. For better results, it is important for the agency to offer development and advancement opportunities in areas in which the employee is willing to do more to become qualified.

As the information in Appendix F indicates, the OPM appears less inclined to focus on the lower level and lower quality employees and, instead, continues to focus the training on employees who appear to have a greater guarantee of being successful (i.e., GS-14 and GS-15). However, if enough similar-sized agencies with similar scenarios as Agency X produced similar results through their own advancement-specific training, then

the OPM may eventually find itself forced into serving only GS-14s, GS-15s, and possibly the remaining SESs. As a result, Agency X could eventually satisfy the desires of the lower GS-level employees, causing OPM to have to recondition itself into something more adaptable to the new environment in which it finds itself (Christensen, 2013). The process could ultimately result in improvements in advancement-style training across all applicable levels of government.

Obviously, Agency X is not solely in the business of administering leadership-development programs. It is necessary for the agency's leaders to focus on many other things. Consequently, achieving the necessary balance could be complicated. Additional recommendations for Agency X include implementing job rotations at all levels of the organization, particularly the executive level, which may prove to be a cost-saving venture in effective training. The organization could also take a deeper look into the onboarding process for new executives.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study

This study exposes areas in which additional empirical research can be conducted. The researcher used a qualitative and inductive study to create a theory for understanding better why higher level employment gaps or vacancies within organizations do not get filled, essentially interpreting why people do not advance or progress. There are limitations associated with this study, but the limitations do not lessen the substance and impact that the research findings may generate.

Some bias could have occurred due to the researcher's affiliation and tenure with the agency in question, resulting in some subjectivity with the interview questions and allowing room for interpretation. Additionally, although the methodology for the study may be suitable for determining appropriate constructs, and ultimately the potential

causality, it may not be a proper fit for analyzing whether relationships exist between the constructs.

The study was conducted with only one organization, although an attempt at applying the theory to another organizational setting (i.e., intermediate educational institution) was made. In the interviews, participants repeatedly compared their individual situation to past affiliations with other organizations, such as the Army, Air Force, or Navy. However, the researcher was unable to determine adequately the veracity of their remarks with the association of the derived theory.

When sampling participants, the researcher used purposeful sampling in an effort to gain maximum variation of participants within the research setting while attempting to “find needed data to fill gaps and saturate categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 103). However, obtaining perspectives from participants of a more diverse pool of functional backgrounds could provide broader viewpoints while centering in on finer elements that may have been missed. Additionally, as an appendage to the previous discussion regarding an organization’s capabilities and culture, the concept of 21st-century organizational-leadership development and its associated opportunities and frameworks could stand to be reviewed more closely.

Further recommendations for future study are to use this theory to determine the mask of ambiguity in other organizations and settings. Researchers may also want to determine any impacts that future retirements may have on employment gaps 5 to 10 years from the date of this dissertation. For additional insight, researchers studying this or other organizations may benefit by utilizing the organization’s Equal Employment Opportunity surveys. Researchers may also consider a study on the restructuring of SES program curriculum or at least the institutions definitions and requirements.

To conclude, this dissertation presents groundwork from which additional progress can be made toward employee advancement. The study makes inroads into reasons why employees may be refusing to advance into higher levels of the organizational structure and the effects that an organization's policy may have on that advancement. The researcher contends that fully qualified employees are refusing to ascend into senior or executive positions based on the constructs identified in the research, which is ultimately due to the mask of ambiguity. The outcome also offers elements for revising an organization's strategic plan beyond merely what the organization will do to reach its strategic objectives and more into why and how an organization can accomplish those objectives.

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Appendix A

Pilot Survey

Pilot Survey

1. I have a strong personal commitment to my professional growth & development.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
2. My professional development is a mutual responsibility between me and DCMA.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
3. Being mentored by a senior level leader is expected in a leadership development program.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
4. Current executive leaders within the DCMA are sincerely interested in my professional development and advancement.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
5. It is possible to become a senior or executive level leader in the DCMA.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
6. I want to advance into senior or executive level leadership positions in the DCMA.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
E. If you do NOT want to advance into senior or executive level leadership positions in the DCMA, please explain:
7. I am aware of DCMA's leadership programs.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
8. DCMA's leadership programs are available for my participation.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
9. I want to participate in DCMA leadership programs. Briefly explain why:
A. Yes B. No
10. I have received all the training I need to grow in my career.
A. Yes B. No
11. Participation in DCMA leadership programs will enable me to improve in my job function.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
12. Participation in DCMA leadership programs will help me advance into higher levels of leadership within the DCMA.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree
13. DCMA offers fair opportunities to be identified for participation into leadership development programs.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree

14. My eIDP designates how I will use DCMA's leadership programs to advance in my federal government career.
A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Disagree D. Strongly Disagree

General Comments

15. What benefits do you expect to receive from participation in leadership development opportunities, please explain:
16. Please add any comments related to leadership growth and development in the DCMA that have not been addressed in this survey.

Demographics

17. What is your pay grade?
A. GS 1-10
B. GS 11-13
C. GS 14-15
D. SES (Senior Executive Service)
E. Other
18. What is your gender?
A. Male
B. Female
19. What is your age group?
A. 25 and under
B. 26-29
C. 30-39
D. 40-49
E. 50-59
F. 60-69
G. 70 or older
20. Please select the race or national origin category with which you most closely identify (Please select one or more):
A. American Indian or Alaska Native
B. Asian
C. Black or African American
D. Hispanic or Latino
E. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
F. White
G. Other

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Responder Code: _____

Location: _____

Date / Time: _____

Personal Work Experience and Future Employment Plans

(Instruction to the interviewee) First, I just want to get a general understanding of your current employment and tenure

- How long have you been an employee of the agency?
- How long have you been in your current grade (GS-level)?
- Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your present job?
 - How satisfied are you, with what you feel your opportunities are, to get a better job within the agency?
- Do you feel you have received all the training you need to grow in your career?
 - Why or why not?
- What is your retirement program?
 - (CSRS) or (FERS) - Civil Service Retirement System or Federal Employees Retirement System?
- Do you intend to remain in the federal government at least until you are eligible to retire?
 - Are you considering leaving the agency within the next year, and if so, why?

Professional Development

(Instruction to the interviewee) Next, I would like to talk about your understanding and views regarding professional development opportunities within the agency.

- In general, tell me what you know about the agency's leadership programs.
 - How did you hear/learn about the program(s)?
 - How clearly do you think this information was advertised?
- What do you think are some of the reasons employees participate in the agency's leadership programs?
- Have you participated in any of the Centralized Development Programs (CDP) the agency offers?
 - If so, which CDPs have you participated in? When?
 - What were the highlights of the program?
 - How could the program have been improved?
- Have you participated in any Candidate Development Programs (CDP) offered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)?
 - If so, which CDPs have you participated in? When?
 - What were the highlights of the program?
 - How could the program have been improved?
- If you will, tell me about any experiences you have had (either successes or failures) with the promotion process in the agency or the government in general.

Views & Interests

(Instruction to the interviewee) Now, I just want to get a broad understanding of your

views and interests.

- What do you think are some of the required qualifications to become a senior or executive leader?
 - How did you discover this information?
- What do you think is the root cause why someone does not become a senior or executive leader?
 - What is your opinion of serving in a senior or SES position and what do you feel has influenced that opinion?
- How interested do you feel current executive agency leaders are about your professional development and advancement?
- What affect do you think policy may have on the agency's ability to implement leadership development opportunities?
- What do you think was the initial purpose for which the agency was created?
 - What aspects of that initial purpose are still in existence today?

Attractors & Detractors

(Instruction to the interviewee) Lastly, I would like to talk about the attractors and detractors to advancement within the agency.

- What do you think are some of the reasons why an employee would want to advance into senior or executive leadership roles?
 - Are there other attractors to serving in a senior or executive leadership position?
- What do you think are some of the reasons why a very qualified person would not advance into senior or executive leadership roles?
 - Are there other detractors to serving in a senior or executive leadership position?
- In your opinion, how do the attractors compare with the detractors?
- What do you feel are some things the agency can do to improve the ability to fill senior or executive level vacancies?

Wrap-Up

(Instruction to the interviewee) In closing, I'd like to ask you some questions about yourself. Your response to these questions is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Age:

GS/SES level:

Education (highest level):

Gender (*Note*):

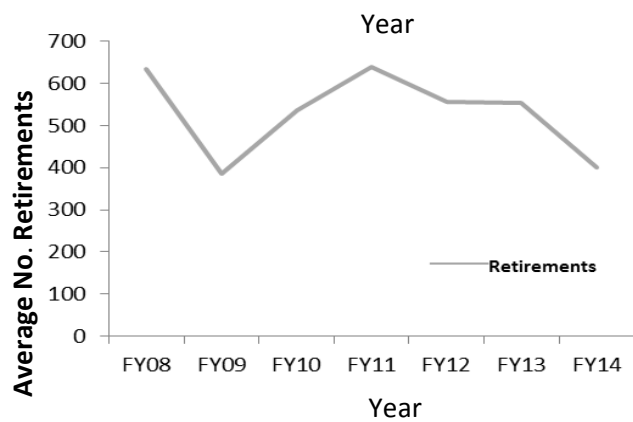
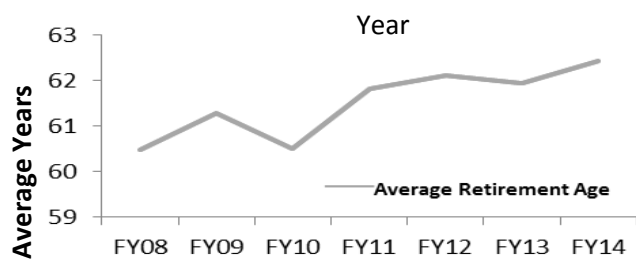
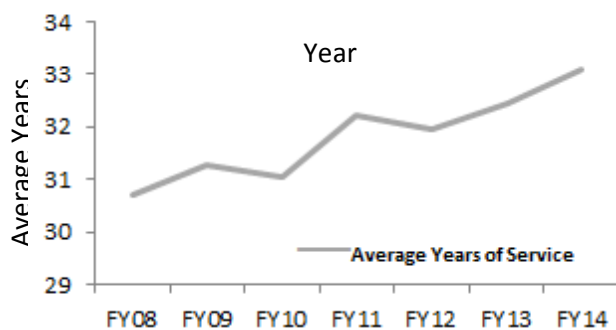
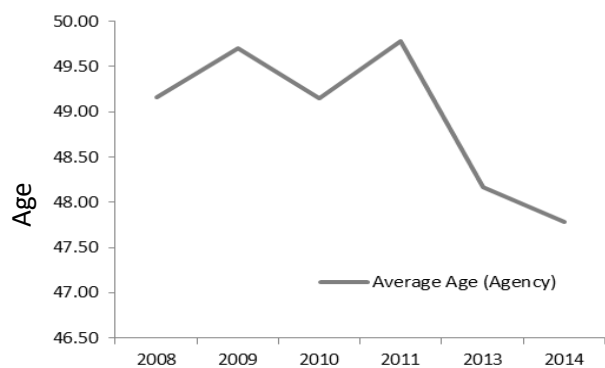
1. Those are all the questions that I have – given that I am interested in employee advancement within the agency, is there anything else you think I should know?
2. Do you have any additional questions for me?

Thanks so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Appendix C

Trends in Age, Years of Service, Retirement Age, and Number of Retirements

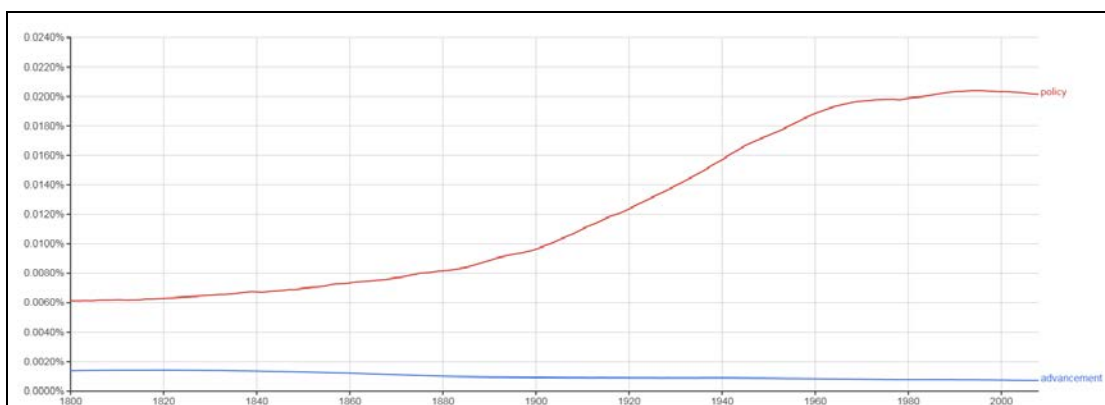
Trends in Age, Years of Service, Retirement Age, and Number of Retirements



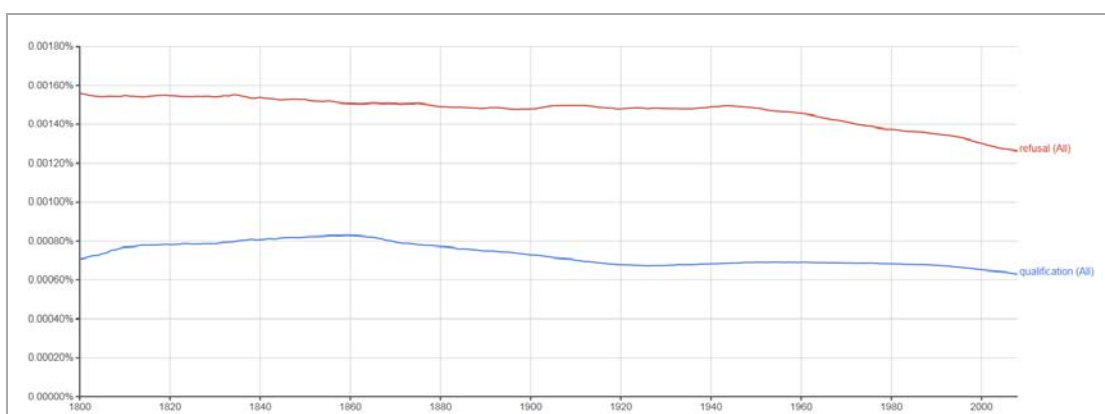
Appendix D
Frequency of Word Usage

Frequency of Word Usage

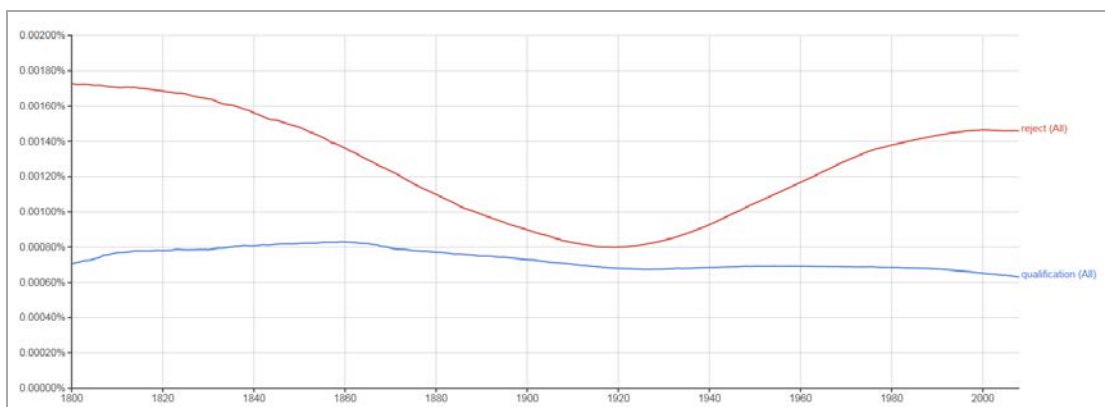
Advancement and Policy



Qualification and Refusal



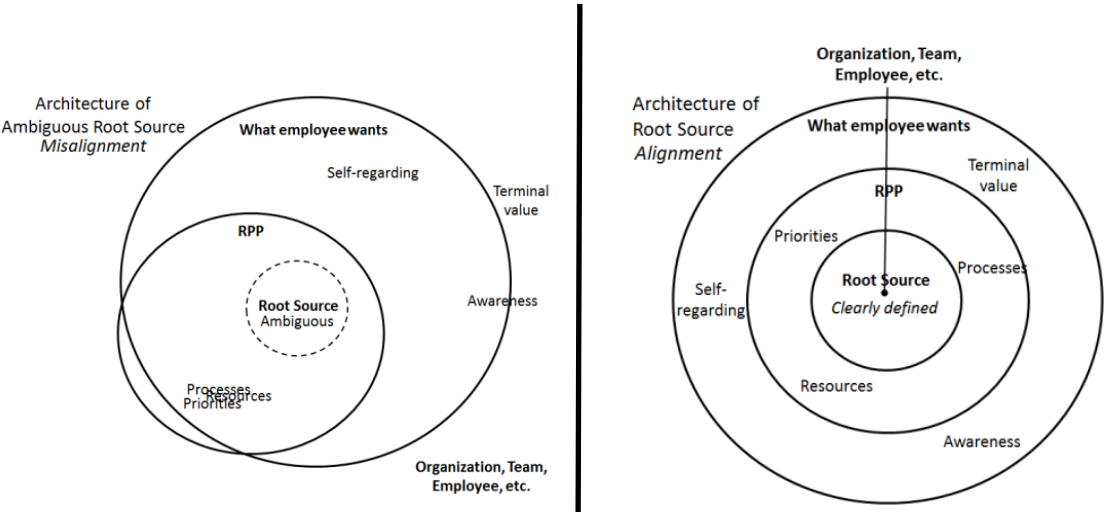
Qualification and Reject



Appendix E

Conceptual Model

Conceptual Model



Appendix F

Performance Trajectory for Agency X

Performance Trajectory for Agency X

